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FANNY ELLSWORTH, Editor

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WILL OF IRON

By DOROTHY L. BONAR

ADELE went to Bigfork to help an old man out of a jam, and found a blue-eyed young man in a jam, too. Helping him was more exciting.

ADELE BARRETT was sitting in her father's outer office the first time she saw Dan Whipple. The click of his bootheels drew her gaze from a window, then his striking appearance held it. For he was seventy if a day, and the handsomest man of that age whom she had ever seen.

Though he was not tall, still a certain erectness and arrogance in his carriage conveyed an impression of stature. He had a square face with a rock-like chin and snow-white eyebrows below which his eyes were a startling electric blue. At sight of Adele he took off a beaver Stetson, uncovering a great shock of white hair, curly and feathery fine.

"Is Barrett in, Miss?" he inquired in a deep voice which resounded in the room.

Before Adele could reply, Peavler, her father's clerk, slid off his stool. "Yes, Mr. Whipple," he said nervously. "But he wasn't expecting you until this afternoon. It's time for lunch now."

Dan Whipple brushed aside the hint that he come back later. "My business is more important than grub," he said tersely. "Tell him I'm here. Those papers fixed up yet?"

"Oh, yes sir!" came the clerk's assurance. "All ready for your signature, sir." His glance at Adele was both pained and flustered. "Only Miss Barrett is waiting to take her father home to lunch."

As his voice trailed off ineffectually, Whipple turned a penetrating gaze upon the girl. "So you're Barrett's daughter, eh?" he rumbled.

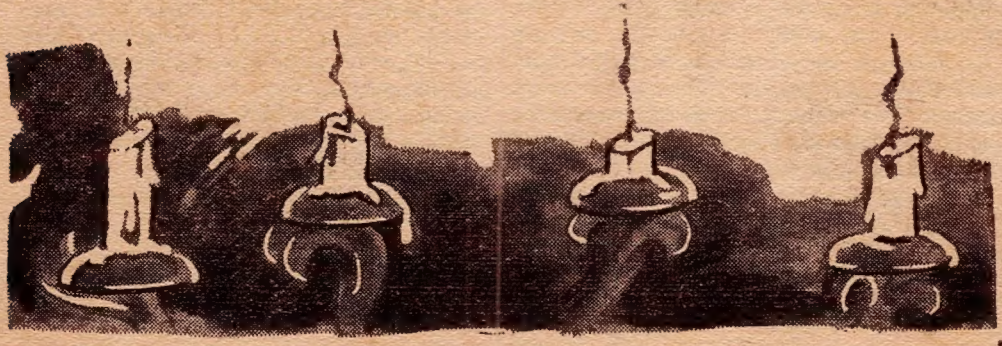
Adele restrained an impish impulse to put a finger under her chin and curtsey. Instead she nodded, submitting to his scrutiny with all the unruffled calm of one who has known nothing but security all her life.

She was twenty-one, and, with her father the biggest lawyer in Denver, had always had almost her every wish granted. Yet the warm generosity of her nature had not been affected. It shone from inside, making her even lovelier than waving brown hair, long-lashed grey eyes, a clear skin, and regular features warranted.

"I'm Adele Barrett," she admitted in characteristic friendly fashion. "And you must be the Montana cattleman Dad mentioned, the owner of the Diamond X up Bigfork way?"

The ranchman's gaze sharpened. "So he's been talkin' about me, has he?" he observed testily.

"Oh, nothing you'd mind," Adele made haste to assure him. "Dad doesn't betray the confidences of his clients. He simply men-



tioned meeting you because of course everyone in Denver has heard of the Diamond X. You ship more beef here than any other brand."

"Reckon that's so," he admitted. Then he frowned and turned away.

Adele was gazing out the window again, trying to curb her interest, when the door of the private office opened.

"You might as well come in, Mr. Whipple," said George Barrett. "Peavler and my daughter can sign as witnesses." To the latter he added, "This won't take long, honey."

But he was mistaken. After writing her name at the bottom of a document she took to be a will, Adele had started to follow Peavler out of the room when Dan Whipple spoke.

"Mind waitin' a minute, Miss?" he inquired. After she had paused and turned, he crossed swiftly to the door left open by the clerk, and closed it.

"I reckon what I'm goin' to ask will sound loco to you," he said, coming back to the lawyer's desk. "But, believe me, I've got a good reason. I want this new will at home, but I can't take it there myself and it can't be sent through the mail. Now would you be too busy to follow me up in three or four days and fetch it to me?"

In twenty-five years of law practice, George Barrett had doubtless been the recipient of many strange requests. Now, showing no surprise, he said merely, "I'm afraid I would, Mr. Whipple. I've got a replevin case on my hands that I couldn't possibly leave. I might send Peavler, though. He's absolutely trustworthy."

"And looks just what he is!" snorted the ranchman. "A law clerk and a timid one to boot. He'd be spotted and handled like a kid. Sure there's nobody else?"

The lawyer thought a moment then shook his head. "I'm sorry."

But Whipple seemed to have expected that answer. He said quickly, "How about your daughter here? She looks plenty smart and spunky. And nobody'd suspect a girl of carryin' important papers of mine!"

He turned to Adele. "How about it, Miss? I've got a Chinee cook who's been with the Diamond X thirty years, and the salt of the earth he is, too, though purt' near deaf now. And I've got a girl somewhere around your age. Marian's nineteen. You'd enjoy a visit in Montana, wouldn't you?"

"Why, I—I don't know," stammered Adele in surprise.

Yet she felt a sudden ripple of excitement. Though she had lived all her life in Denver, many of her schoolmates had been ranch girls whose homes she had visited. And those days of open range and boots and saddle had been the most completely satisfying of any she had ever known. It would be heavenly to visit a truly big outfit like the Diamond X.

Her father touched upon that point without delay. "I don't know, Mr. Whipple. Bigfork is thirty miles from the railroad. She'd have to ride a rough, dusty stage from Granger."

"Oh, I wouldn't mind that!" broke in Adele impulsively.

Her father's glance was quizzical. "You mean you'd like to go, honey?" he questioned.

Adele answered thoughtfully. "Yes, I think I would. But not without a little better understanding of the situation. Why can't Mr. Whipple carry this will home himself, or let it be mailed to him? And why is he afraid to trust Peavler with it?"

"Summed up like a true lawyer's daughter!" murmured her father humorously. Then, growing serious, he turned once more to his client. "I've been thinking along the same lines, Mr. Whipple. Before Adele commits herself, we'd have to know exactly why this mission is necessary."

"I expected to tell you that," replied the cattleman. "And I had a hunch it'd be this way. That's why I asked the girl to stay. It's kind of a long story."

WITH a thoughtful frown he dropped into a chair. Adele perched herself on the arm of her father's, heart-beats quickening with anticipation.

"If I try to take that will home, I'll never get there with it," he began bluntly. "Ten to one there's a lookout in Granger. The stage I take to Bigfork will be held up. If I hire a bronc and try cuttin' through the hills, I'll be bushwhacked. There's been," he added "two attempts already to rub me out!"

Adele inhaled sharply. But her father continued to gaze calmly at his client, waiting.

After a moment the latter continued his story. "My wife and I never had no young ones of our own, but five years before she died we took in an orphaned baby girl, Marian. Then one day my brother's wife run off, desertin' both him and their boy. Ed shot hisself, so the kid, Mark, come to live with us,

too. A couple years later our family growed another notch when my sister and her husband —Cameron was their name—froze to death in a Wyomin' blizzard, leavin' their boy, Lee, behind.

"So there's the three I raised almost like sister and brothers, though they're no blood relation except for the boys bein' cousins. Outside of Mark teasin' Marian a lot, they've got along together, too.

"Now right after Lee come, we was a right happy family. That's when I made my first will dividin' the Diamond X between the three of 'em. The last year, though, I commenced to realize that was a mistake. Marian would marry Mark or Lee one o' these days, and that would give one of the boys controllin' interest of the ranch. I begin to see it'd be better to leave the ranch equal between Lee and Mark, and let Marian come into her share when she married one or the other."

"But suppose she doesn't marry one of them?" blurted Adele. "Suppose she falls in love with someone else?"

The hardening of Dan Whipple's jaw emphasized its stubborn solidity. "Reckon I ain't much taken with the foolish notions young girls are likely to get," he said curtly. "Marian knows I want her to have a share of the ranch. She knows it's for her own good that I favor her marryin' one of the boys. She'll be sensible."

"I see." Adele looked thoughtful. "And how about Mark and Lee?" she inquired. "Will they be sensible, too?"

Only her father caught the faint, ironical edge to her voice and flung her a reproving glance. Dan Whipple was too deep in his story and problem to notice.

"Mark's always talked of marryin' her," he declared. "That's the way he used to tease her most. But she's always been mighty fond of Lee, so I'm leavin' that part up to her. Although, personal, I'd rather she picked Mark. He's a good, sober lad, while Lee's a wild young hellion with a lot of notions that're liable to get him into trouble some day. Still he's my nephew, too—and I thought a heap of his ma and pa both—so I won't draw no line between the two in property settlement or such. If she'd rather have him, all right."

GEORGE BARRETT spoke up. "Sounds to me like you're on good terms with the only ones who can hope to profit at your death," he said. "So where do these attempts on your life come in, do you think?"

The ranchman's expression darkened. "From a skunk who'd like to horn in on the third of the Diamond X Marian'd get by my old will!"

In a calmer voice he continued, "Marian's a pretty girl. Naturally there's bound to be moon-eyed punchers tryin' to hang around. Well, I didn't hold her down too tight until Gene Tilbury come along. He's a young squirt who showed up one day with a handful of cows and took up land in Bobcat Canyon.

"Marian took sort of a shine to him and he rushed her somethin' fierce until I put a stop to it. I know a schemer when I see one, and a third of the Diamond X is worth ten times more than he can ever hope to see honest if he lives to be a hundred.

"Well, he got ugly about it. Finally I said that before I'd let Marian marry a fortune-huntin' skunk, I'd make a new will and cut her out. That's where I put my foot in it, I reckon. Anyway, I was shot at next day while ridin' in from a line camp. Just happened he hit my bronc instead of me. I laid low and in a minute Mark, who'd rode out to meet me, comes tearin' up.

"He'd caught a glimpse of Tilbury beatin' it, so right away the play was clear. Tilbury had taken my threat about the new will serious and was out to get me before I could go through with it. He's a handsome jasper, and must figger he could win Marian over again once I'm out of the way."

"But it looks like he's tied his own hands!" pointed out the lawyer. "By failing in his first attempt at murder, and being seen, he's placed himself in such a position that if anything happened to you now, a rope would be as good as around his neck."

Dan Whipple gave him a hard, straight look. "D'you think I'd let it out?" he demanded. "Nobody but Mark and me knows. In the first place, there was no sense upsettin' Marian. In the second—" his face darkened with a surge of blood —"d'you think I'd let a young four-flusher send me— Old Man Whipple—crawlin' to the law and public opinion for protection?"

Discreetly George Barrett did not answer. But the glance he exchanged with his daughter was one of grim humor. Both understood that to the man before them a fierce pride and the determination to have his own way meant more than life itself.

Adele found herself speculating as to the effect of that iron will upon the three who had grown up under it. What are they really like —Mark Whipple, the steady and dependable; Marian Whipple, sweetly obedient or cowed; Lee Cameron, the rebel? Of a sudden the names seemed to take on a strange significance. She waited eagerly to hear more about them.

THAT night I did some hard thinkin'," continued the ranchman. "I knew if he tried bushwhackin' again he'd prob'ly get me. So I made up my mind to really change that will right away and block his play that much. At the same time, I hated to cut Marian out, even though I'd been considerin' it for a different reason. It would look too much like he'd scared me into it, see? So I thought of another way to throw his damn threat back in his face and still blast his plan to nothin', if he went through with it for pure cussedness."

Dan Whipple grinned at Adele with a gleam of almost wicked delight in his eyes. "This new will you just signed as witness, Miss, leaves *all* the Diamond X to Marian!" he announced. "But only on condition that she marries either Mark or Lee. If she does, the other one gets $50,000. If she don't, they all lose out. The whole damn shebang goes to the State!"

"But that's fantastic!" gasped Adele, again too astounded to remember it was none of her business. "To make the inheritance of one depend on the actions of the other two. Why, that's unfair! And besides, the Diamond X must represent your whole life's work. You wouldn't really want to risk having it pass out of the possession of your own family, would you?"

Briefly the corners of the old man's mouth quivered. Then his eyes became steely. "If neither Mark nor Lee can win Marian with the whole Diamond X on their side, it's because one hasn't the gumption and the other's a fool!" he said harshly. "It'll prove that neither's fit to rod the spread I give my life to. In that case, I'd a hundred times rather it went to help build up a new state into the grand one Montana'll be some day!"

Adele found herself silenced. He was a hard man, this Dan Whipple. Even pretty much of a tyrant, she was sure. But he had strength and the indomitable spirit of an empire builder, so that while she might not agree with his reasoning, she could not help admiring and even sympathizing a little with him, too.

"I wouldn't go back to Bowden in Bigfork, who drew up my other will," he continued. "He's too handy with a pen, and we'd had a fallin' out over his signin' my name to a paper once when I couldn't get to town. Made me money on the deal, but I didn't stomach him doin' such a good job with my signature that I could almost believe I'd wrote it myself. I'd heard of you, Barrett, so I decided to come to Denver and get you to do it for me."

GENE *WHIPPLE* *MARIAN*

"The next day I hitched up my blacks to drive to town and catch the stage. Everybody knows that team—the fastest and snakiest in the country. Everybody knows I'm the only one ever drives 'em. That made it easy for Tilbury to spot me when I was a good distance away."

WELL, Tilbury was layin' for me. Right where the road skirts a high cutback with a deep wash on t'other side, a bear hide comes sailin' down to land smack dab in front of the horses. They went hog wild, o'course, and if anything had broke, we'd all of smashed down into that wash.

"Well, I ain't drove horses sixty years for nothin'. The lines and harness held. I almost busted their jaws but I held them broncs on the road and backed 'em up to where I could wheel and head home.

"I'd found out, though, that I'd never get to Denver, or even off the ranch, unless I sneaked off some night. So that's what I done—left a note sayin' I'd gone away on business, slipped a horse out of the corral and made Granger just in time to catch the mornin' train.

"I had to sneak off at night!" he repeated, a strangled note of humiliation and rage in his voice. "And now I've got to find a way to sneak this will home or it'll all be for nothin'!"

"You might leave the original here and take a copy," suggested Barrett.

But the ranchman shook his head. "No. Bowden wanted to do that with the other will, too, and I couldn't see it. I like the genuine article where I can lay hands on it when I've a mind to. With all respect to you, Mr. Barrett, what's in my house I've got, and everybody concerned will know I've got it includin' Tilbury." And he chuckled his anticipation of triumph.

"Still you don't expect him to give up until he's certain this new will *is* beyond his reach," said Adele slowly. "He'll know where you've gone and why. Now he'll watch for your return, make every effort to get hold of this document and destroy it so that at your death the old one will stand anyway."

"Plumb center, Miss," nodded Whipple. "That's why I can't carry it on me, and I can't risk the mail because the Post Office clerk is a friend of Tilbury's. And I can't take a chance on Peavler because Tilbury's no fool. He'd think of a messenger and check up just to be sure. But you, Miss . . . Shucks! Marian was off to a girl's school for two years. What'd be funny about a schoolmate comin' to visit her, and how could she be connected with me?"

"It's perfect!" agreed Adele. Her heart quickened its beat as the thought of a masquerade captured her imagination.

Her father, however, was not so readily persuaded. "I don't know, honey," he said. "With murder and no telling how many accomplices running loose up there, it might be dangerous."

"Pouf!" said Adele airily. "It's Mr. Whipple they'll be after, not me. It'll be a cinch to get to the Diamond X with that paper. And once I have I'll be perfectly safe, and so will he."

Her sensitive mouth sobered. Her fine, grey eyes took on an earnest expression. "Don't you see, Dad?" she said softly. "He doesn't like it put this way, but this new will is really Mr. Whipple's protection. As long as Tilbury knows it exists, he'll have nothing to gain by striking. My trip—the trouble I might be

ADELE *LEE*

put to—is such a little to do to block a cowardly murderer's plan, isn't it?"

A long moment George Barrett searched his daughter's face while his own softened. "If you put it that way, honey," he capitulated. "But be careful. And we'd better tell your mother you're visiting a school chum, too, so she won't worry."

He looked at the ranchman. "You sure you'll be able to fix that story up with your daughter? Since she was once interested in this Tilbury. . . ."

"That's done with, on her part," interrupted the ranchman. "Besides, I'll cook up another explanation to do until Miss Adele arrives. Marian won't be no trouble. She's a sweet girl, and so are you, Miss, a real thoroughbred just like I sized you up. I'll be proud to have you visitin' the Diamond X. There's only one thing more. Your dad's pretty well knowed throughout the West. Reckon you'd better use a different name and claim a different place as your home just to play safe."

"All right," agreed Adele. Now that the die was cast there was added color in her cheeks and her eyes were shining. "I'll leave Denver three days behind you. And I'll be . . . let's see . . . Adele Brown . . . of Durango!"

RIDING towards Bigfork, Lee Cameron's face wore an unwontedly sober expression. There was something funny about the Old Man slipping off in the middle of the night, he reflected for the hundredth time. In the first place it had always been Dan Whipple's way to do exactly as he pleased, openly and boldly. In the second, Ben Bowden, who had handled his affairs for years, claimed this time to be also completely in the dark.

Bowden had stopped Lee on the street the first time he had met the stage, hopeful of receiving some word from his uncle explaining his absence further. "It's funny where he could have gone," he'd remarked, peering upward with the small, purplish eyes that always reminded Lee of juniper berries. "You don't suppose something could have happened to him, do you?"

"What d'you mean?" Lee's look sharpened.

"Well . . ." The lawyer's glance slid away. "Everybody's talkin' about his set-to with Tilbury. And then that horse of his bein' shot right afterwards . . .". He spread his hands.

"That rumpus with Gene wasn't no worse than a dozen others he's had with punchers he thought were hangin' around Marian too close!" said Lee deliberately. "As for his bronc, it broke a leg and he shot it himself!"

"So Mark claims, too," admitted the lawyer. "But," he smiled deprecatingly, "you know how the town gossips have to color up their stories."

"I suppose," said Lee shortly, and pushed on.

But he had found himself genuinely disturbed, not so much by Bowden's nosiness, which had always annoyed him, as by something deeper that he could not define. What, for instance, could have provoked even the town gossips into making something special of the Old Man's recent run-in with Gene Tilbury?

So far as they could know there was no connection between Dan Whipple's quarrel with his daughter's suitor, the breaking of his horse's leg, and his mysterious departure from home. For that matter, so far as Lee himself knew there was none. But evidently some one was trying to tie them up.

On more than one previous occasion Marian had wept bitterly over being forbidden the company of a certain young rider; the Old Man had stormed and put his foot down in as turbulent a fashion. It was only from there on, in things of which the townspeople should rightly be unaware, that he found the difference to account for the speculation and vague foreboding filling him. He couldn't quite make it out.

Never before had either Marian or the Old Man subsided so quickly, the former into a frozen whiteness that discouraged even sympathy, the latter into a grim silence that forbade comment. Then, too, he had come home late the next night to find the Diamond X owner, who habitually retired early, pacing the living room floor in deepest thought. And he had been in the yard the next morning when the Old Man returned, scarcely fifteen minutes after starting out for town, with the blacks wild-eyed and straining in their harness.

"Spooked at a calf in the brush, the damn fools!" had explained the Old Man tersely, after Lee's grip on their bridles had helped to stop them.

Instead of turning them about and starting out again, however, he'd barked an order to put them up, gone into the house and remained there the rest of the day. That night he had slipped away.

"One thing is certain, it adds up to something big," soliloquized Lee. Dropping knotted reins to his mount's neck, he delved for tobacco. And he frowned, for he knew that unless he heard something from his uncle today, he, Lee Cameron, must launch himself into a determined effort to learn what that something was.

How to begin was, of course, the problem. It . . . .

THE buckskin beneath him, named Cougar because he was tawny and quick and powerful as a mountain lion, halted with a suddenness that disrupted thoroughly his rider's line of thought.

Ahead the road stretched, untraveled, to the hills marking the exit of the valley and gateway to Bigfork, situated where the Wolf River abandoned mountain brawling to divide itself into two sedate arms flung across rolling prairie. Behind lay even greater emptiness and distance. It was to the left that the intelligent head and alert ears pointed.

Once Lee Cameron would have reined that way without hesitation, investigated with open, heedless curiosity. Now the hint of mystery surrounding recent events had dropped a halter of caution about him.

BOWDEN *MARK*

He put the newly rolled cigarette into his mouth but did not light it. Instead he stood in his stirrups, stretching his lean length of body to its full six feet as his gaze moved slowly, probingly, over the near landscape.

A creek bottom lay to his left, marked by the blended greenery of cottonwoods and willows. Where the larger trees had expanded their growth to form a substantial grove, a movement caught his eyes—a bit of dull color he identified as a patch of horse's hide. Two horses, he was correcting himself, when the cry reached his ears.

It was no scream, for it lacked a wild note of terror. But it was feminine and familiar, vibrant with anger and alarm. Lee knew, even before he threw away his smoke and put spurs to his mount's flanks, exactly who had voiced it.

In giant bounds Cougar covered the intervening space, flashed into the trees. Warned by the pound of his hoofs, the couple there had broken apart by the time he was plunging to a halt. Nevertheless, the girl uttered a glad cry of recognition as Lee slid from his saddle to confront them.

A slim brunette in a divided skirt and man's flannel shirt, she ran quickly to his side. The man, tall and blond, pulled in the corners of his mouth, giving it a sullen quirk.

It was the latter Lee addressed bitingly. "What in hell are you up to, Mark?"

Only for a moment did Mark Whipple meet his cousin's hard stare. Then he dropped his eyes, muttering. "Just tryin' to keep Marian out of trouble. For all the thanks a body gets, though, he might as well. . . ."

"He followed me here!" broke in Marian passionately. "Ever since Dad went away he's been watching every move I make, trailing along like a sneaking coyote every time I ride out! He's got to stop it, Lee. He's got to leave me alone!"

"Now take it easy!" broke in Lee soothingly. He had witnessed too many quarrels between these two to be impressed solely by Marian's outburst.

BUT here again he sensed a strange, sinister note in a familiar situation. The color had not yet returned to the girl's cheeks, neither had she dissolved into tears as she usually did when anger and vexation got the best of her. Instead, the set of her lips and blaze in her eyes caused Lee to look at the other man with new intentness.

"How about that, Mark?" he asked quietly. "What's the idea?"

Mark bridled. "Sure, I've been keepin' an eye on her!" he admitted, and added virtuously, "Somebody's got to. She's been meetin' Tilbury on the sly. Suppose it gets out and the Old Man hears about it?"

"Nobody'd be mean enough to tell him but you!" burst out Marian. "Nobody'd even know except for your spying! And I—There's nothing wrong in my seeing Gene, even if Dad doesn't approve. Is there, Lee?" she appealed wildly. "All my life I've obeyed

Dad—scarcely even talked back. But I should be old enough now to have a few things my way, shouldn't I?"

The tremble in her voice, the near agony of fear in her eyes, made Lee just a little sick. He had always known that she hadn't the inner strength to hold her own against the Old Man's will to dominate and Mark's stubborn insistence. He had always tried to make himself a buffer between her and the two. But he had not realized until this moment how close her spirit actually was to being crushed.

"Sure, honey," he said, catching her hand in a warm grip. "You're plenty old enough to live your own life and make your own decisions."

"A fine thing to say!" charged Mark angrily. "First thing you know you'll have her runnin' off with Tilbury!"

"Well, what if she does?" demanded Lee with sudden heat. "Gene's all right. All the Old Man's got against him is a fool notion of his own about keepin' the Diamond X in the family!"

"Is that so?" Mark spoke through locked teeth. "I suppose Tilbury didn't try to dry-gulch the Old Man the day after he was run off? I suppose he didn't try to pile him up in a runaway the day after that?"

"Mark!" The exclamation was Marian's. She had gone white to the lips. "You're lying!"

But Mark shook his head. "I'm sorry, Marian," he said. "I don't like to hurt you. But it's true and you've got to know sometime. Tilbury's main interest in you from the start has been the share of the ranch you're in line for."

"Where'd you get all that?" queried Lee sharply.

Mark shrugged. "Half the country's heard him braggin'," he claimed. "And I saw him right after the Old Man's bronc had been shot. He'd told me to meet him, you know, and help bring in that sick bull to be doctored. If Tilbury hadn't heard me comin', he'd probably tried another shot and got the Old Man good."

"I don't believe it!" Though she was shaking violently, Marian had drawn herself up to her full height. Her hands were knotted into small fists. "It's just something you've made up between you to try and turn me against Gene! You'd do anything to get your own way. But I won't give in this time. I won't! And if you ever try to kiss me again, Mark Whipple, I'll—I'll—"

Again the violence of her emotions got the better of her. Sobbing, she whirled and ran to her mount. In a moment she was in the saddle and had sent him leaping into full flight.

BEHIND, an uncomfortable silence endured until the pound of hoofs had diminished into the distance. Then Mark reached for tobacco and papers. Lee let out a pent-up breath.

"And you keep on hopin' she'll break down someday and marry you!" he exclaimed wonderingly. "Why don't you give up and let her alone?"

"Because I'm crazy about her and don't aim to see her made a fool of!" retorted Mark. Filling his lungs with smoke, he blew it out again and surveyed his cousin narrowly through the curling blue vapor.

"But that ain't the only angle," he continued. "That near bushwhackin' really got the Old Man's goat. He shot his mouth off plenty on the way home—give all three of us hell. Marian for fallin' for an hombre like that, me for lettin' him beat my time, you for goin' your own sweet way with no heed for what he wants. He said that unless we straightened up not one of us would get a red cent out of the Diamond X. And I'm bettin' that's where he is right now—makin' a new will with certain conditions we'll all have to live up to or lose out!"

He rolled out the last sentence in the tone of one planting a verbal bombshell. In grim anticipation he waited for it to explode.

But Lee's expression underwent no change. He looked back at his cousin with the same steady blue gaze, his mouth firm and composed as always. "It's his ranch," he pointed out. "Reckon what he wants to do with it is his business."

"But we're his kin!" exclaimed Mark in sheer astonishment. "He's got no right to cut us off and leave everything to the State! That's where it'll go, too, because he as good as said so. You know how wild he was over gettin' Montana admitted to the Union—how he throwed a big barbecue last year to celebrate when she was? I tell you, Lee, he's pigheaded enough to do it!"

"And I'm pigheaded enough not to care one little damn!" drawled Lee. Catching up bridle reins, he added, "I'm goin' into town

to see if there's any word from him yet. Comin' along?"

Mark, however, simply stared at him dumbly. After a moment Lee shrugged, swung into his saddle and again pointed Cougar's nose townward.

IT WAS an afternoon in early June. Overhead a few grey clouds were gathering, but not as yet in force enough to threaten the brightness of a sun smiling warmly on a fresh green world. Spring flowers were everywhere, radiant in their brief blooming. Birds flashed their wings, and sang.

It was an atmosphere to lull even the harassed into a feeling of peace and security. Yet to Lee Cameron it served, by the very force of contrast, to emphasize the sense of unrest that had recently assailed him, an uneasiness considerably heightened by the episode just past.

Mark's prediction of an inheritance in jeopardy had nothing to do with this. He loved the Diamond X all right. He could think of no more satisfying prospect than that of someday finding himself its part owner. But to him nothing in the world could be worth the sacrifice of his independence. He could not, as Mark had always done, concede to the Old Man's every wish, waiving continually his own ideas and inclinations.

He was fully aware that because of this Mark had always been the Old Man's favorite. He knew that the only reason he himself got along with his uncle at all was because he refused, out of a fund of good humor and genuine affection, to bridle whenever the other flew off the handle. He knew he shared equally with Mark and Marian in the Old Man's will mainly because of the latter's clannish loyalty to his own blood. He was also aware that he escaped a lot of explosive attention because he worked as hard as any puncher on the payroll, and because it was Mark the Old Man really wanted Marian to marry.

With the last thought Lee's soberness deepened. For his part, Marian had given final proof today that she would never be won over to that way of thinking. She had revealed her attachment to Gene Tilbury to be far more than a girlish fancy. Of a sudden he saw her as a woman fighting desperately for her right to happiness.

And in the same light he saw Mark, not as a persistent young suitor, determined to win the girl of his choice, but as a man driving adamantly, ruthlessly towards the achievement of his own desires.

It gave Lee an eerie feeling, this realization that the man with whom he had grown up almost like a brother might deep inside be a stranger. And it fetched other disturbing thoughts.

He had always believed that Mark knuckled under to the Old Man because, like Marian, he lacked the strength of will to oppose him. Now, remembering Mark's alarm over the possibility of a new will, he found himself wondering if the other might not have deliberately chosen such a course to curry favor. For the first time he questioned even Mark's determination to marry Marian.

Could he, as far back as they were kids, have looked ahead and realized that the day she became his wife *two*-thirds of the Diamond X was almost certain to pass some day into his hands? Was that another reason for his worry over a changed will? Could that, too, account for his hatred of Gene Tilbury—the fear of another cutting him out of that extra coveted share?

He remembered suddenly that it was Mark who claimed to have seen Tilbury at the time of the shooting of the Old Man's horse, that only Mark's word branded it an attempted drygulching. Still that peculiar runaway of the next day must not be overlooked.

SOMEONE, it appeared, had made two attempts to kill Dan Whipple. Honesty forced Lee to admit this, yet he wasn't at all convinced that it had been Tilbury. No man could go through life as hard-headed and aggressive as the Old Man without making enemies. Might not one of these have emerged from the past, giving Mark an opportunity to eliminate a dangerous rival by heaping the blame on him?

At any rate, since the Old Man had tried to keep it quiet, only Mark could have told Ben Bowden, who must have passed it on to the gossips instead of the reverse as he had tried to make out. Mark had always been a favorite of Bowden's, too. Strange how he'd always managed to ingratiate himself with all those in a position to grant favors.

An abrupt realization of disloyalty caused Lee to check his runaway thoughts. "A fine way to rip up a guy who pulled you out of the creek once when you were almost a goner!" he chided himself in genuine remorse.

And his shame deepened as, with a clatter of galloping hoofs, Mark overtook him a few minutes later.

"Guess I'll ride in with you after all," he announced. "I'm gettin' worried. If we don't hear from the Old Man today, let's try to find out where he went. The way Tilbury tried to keep him from gettin' away to make a new will, chances are he'll try to nab him on the way home and get rid of them both at the same time. We'd ought to try to meet him."

Lee frowned. "If a new will is at the bottom of all this," he argued, "why didn't he go to Bowden, as usual, to fix it up?"

Mark shrugged. "Ben's slow fixin' up papers. You know that. He probably figured that unless he got plumb away, Tilbury'd get him before they was finished up and signed."

Again Lee opened his mouth, but closed it. Yet he could not down a reviving sense of strangeness and antagonism at Mark's persistent accusation of his rival, despite the flimsy nature of his evidence against him. It was almost as though Mark hoped through sheer reiteration to overshadow this and press his own opinion upon others.

"I've been thinkin' about lookin' him up, too," he managed to say noncommittally.

Then he was spared the effort of further speech as they came to the ford of the river flowing wide and placid this last mile above its branching. A short distance farther a last turn of road took them to the foot of Bigfork's main street.

At once it became evident that something unusual was taking place in town. Horses still unhitched, the stage stood in front of the Bigfork Hotel with three times the usual number of onlookers gathered about it. Others still ran in that direction.

In a flash the vagaries of Lee's thoughts crystallized to a sharp conviction of calamity. A touch of spurs sent Cougar thundering ahead. A similar clatter behind told of Mark's mounts close at his heels. Then they were reining to a halt at the edge of the crowd, rearing clear of unwary, scurrying figures.

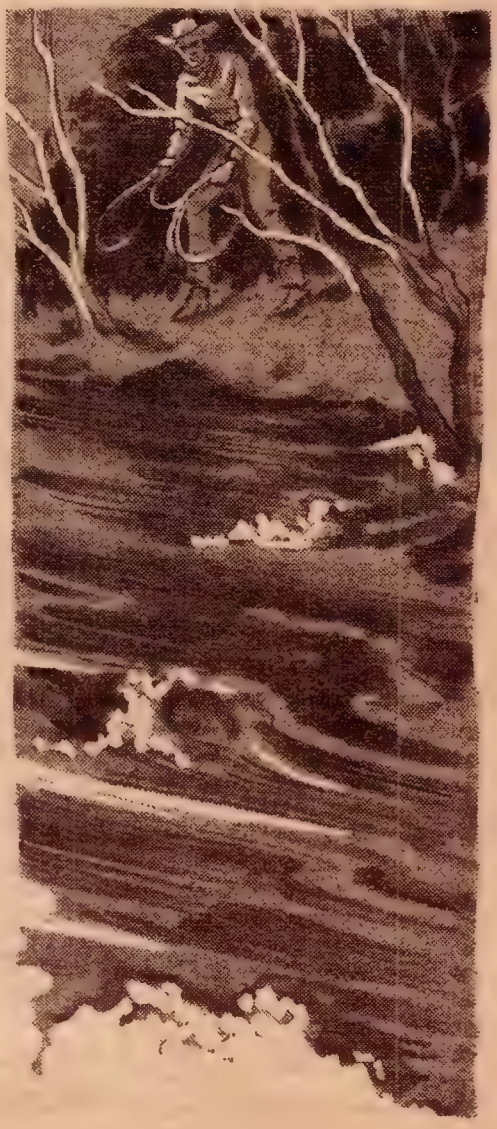
ONE of them, an old man, clutched at Lee's arm as the latter's booted feet hit the ground. "It's Dan Whipple, son!" he wheezed. "Couple varmints held up the stage. Took Dan with 'em to hold for ransom. The sheriff's got the other passengers down to his office now, questionin' 'em."

"Ransom!" Mark's voice was harsh. But a light almost of satisfaction flared in his eyes. "That's just a cover-up, Lee!" he cried. "It's Tilbury, just like I said. He didn't find that new will on the Old Man, so he took him off some place to force him to dig it up!"

"That's a lie!" In a voice hot with indignation, the charge came from the right of the Diamond X pair.

Lee saw Mark give a little start and freeze.

"Someone's spotted us!" cried Lee.



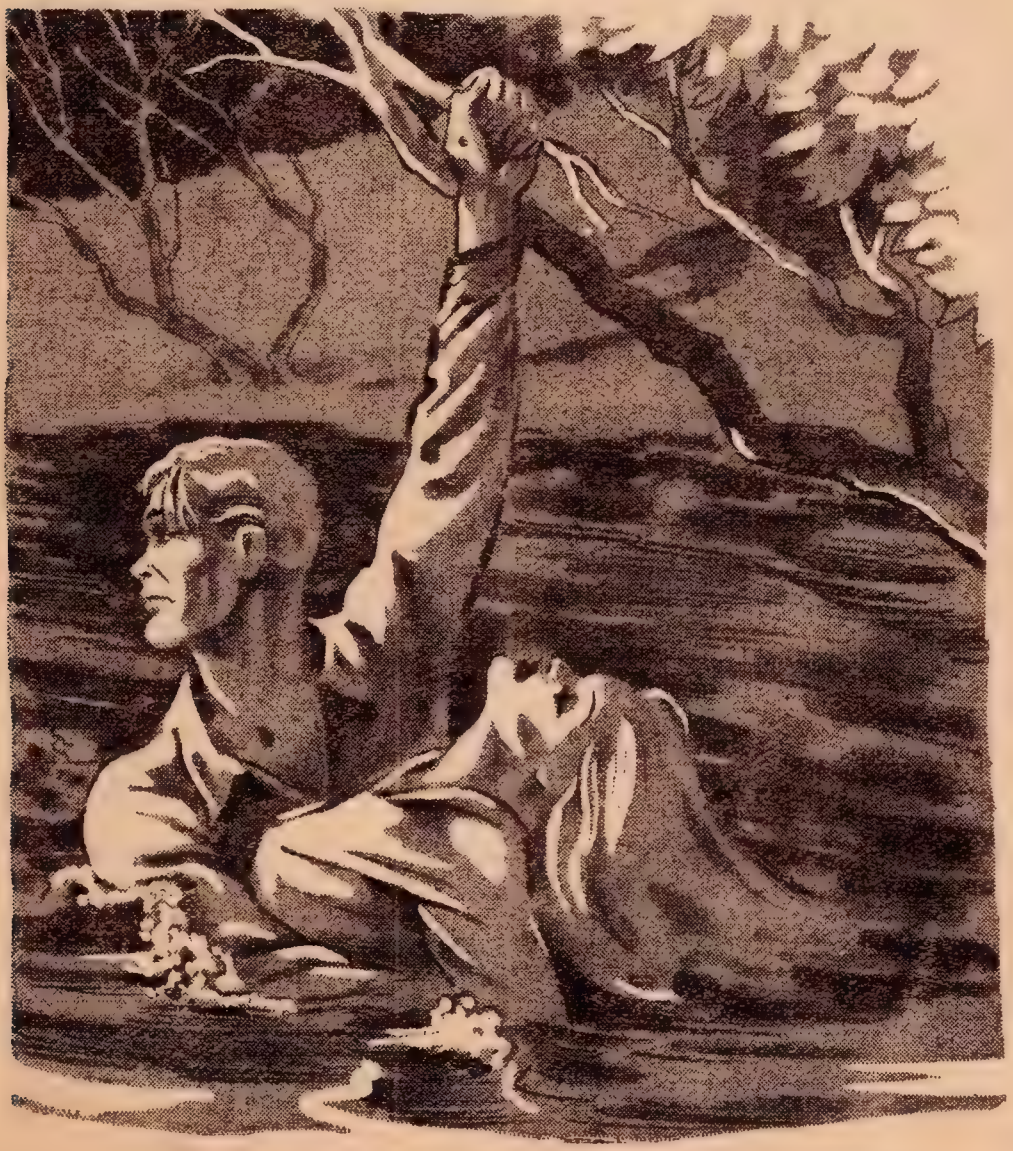
He felt a stirring of the short hairs on the back of his own neck as slowly he turned to face the man who had stood a few feet away, unnoticed amid the press of other spectators.

These melted away as the import of his words dawned upon them. Tilbury stood alone, a cowboy of medium height and build, undistinguished in any way save for an exceptional regularity of features. Usually mild, his brown eyes held now the hot flame of anger.

Yet there was a worried note in his voice as he said to Lee, Mark having not yet turned to take up his challenge, "You don't figger that way, too, do you? How could I have been one of the holdup gents when I been in town the past two hours?"

"You dirty skunk!" Mark whirled, his face twisted with rage. "What about them two punchers you fetched into the country with your measly bunch o' cows? D'you think an alibi for you will cover them, too, while they do your dirty work?"

"He's throwing out a lariat! We'll be out of this in a jiffy!"



"*My* dirty work!" repeated Tilbury, dumfounded. Then, in bitter understanding, "So it's you who started that talk! I might of knowed. Lee. . . ." He turned earnestly to the latter. "You don't think that, too, do you? All that ails him is he's jealous because Marian and me. . . ."

As though the words were the bite of spurs deep into tender hide, Mark jerked. "You murderin' snake!" he spat hoarsely. "Try your poison now on a man that's facin' you!"

The drop of his right hand was swift and deadly.

Tilbury's convulsive reaction was scarcely that of a gun artist. He had no more than touched the butt of his weapon before the barrel of Mark's cleared its holster. A dreadful recognition of doom twisted his face. A split-second from eternity, he strove frantically, vainly, for the speed to save himself. And the spectators held their breath to watch him die.

But there happened to be one close whom the rôle of onlooker in an emergency would never fit. Lee moved, too, his whole right arm a blur of speed. The meeting of his fist and Mark's jaw resounded with the terrific crack of a maul upon a new cedar post.

MARK catapulted backward simultaneously as his gun roared. Drilling two neat holes through the high crown of Tilbury's sombrero, the bullet droned harmlessly skyward. Stunned, his own weapon but half unsheathed, the latter stared with unbelieving eyes at the still, crumpled figure of the man who had failed by only a hair's breadth to kill him.

Swiftly Lee bent, picked up Mark's gun and emptied it. Slipping it back into its holster, then, he motioned the two nearest onlookers, saying curtly, "Help me pack him inside. Somebody fetch some water and whiskey."

Both restoratives were on hand by the time the limp figure was stretched out on a cot in a downstairs room. With a word of thanks Lee ushered his helpers out the door. He had scarcely returned to his charge, however, before a knock compelled him to open it again.

Gene Tilbury stood uncertainly on the threshold. "I've got to talk to you a minute, Lee," he began.

But the latter interrupted savagely. "What in hell you doin' here? Want me to have to do it all over again when he wakes up? Git!"

Still the young former puncher stood his ground. "I ain't pullin' out without thankin' you for savin' my bacon," he said doggedly, "even though I know you was wantin' mostly to keep Mark out of trouble. And there's somethin' else I've got to say. I ain't been in town for two weeks and I run into some mighty funny things today, black looks and nasty remarks on the order of what Mark said that riled me. Seems things have been happenin' to Old Man Whipple, and I'm bein' blamed for it. Well, I ain't guilty, so help me!"

There was an earnest ring in his voice. His eyes met Lee's squarely. And more than ever the latter found himself convinced of this man's veracity and fine character.

"Which makes everything just dandy," he muttered grimly, after he had persuaded Tilbury to return to Bobcat Canyon and remain indefinitely.

For it was proved now that Bowden and Mark were responsible for the gossip in circulation, and should they succeed in working up enough feeling against the country's newest rancher, there was no telling what might develop should Dan Whipple's rescue be long delayed, or should he be found slain.

Torn between the habit of loyalty to his cousin and a feeling that slow, inexorable forces were working towards placing them in opposite camps, Lee set about reviving Mark. For minutes, then, he listened to the latter's ravings and accusations, finally cutting in tersely,

"Suppose you cuss me out some other time? Right now the Old Man needs help and we've lost enough time. You ridin' with me or not?"

"No!" Mark fairly spat the word, heaving himself unsteadily to his feet. "You've proved where you stand!" he said harshly. "Sidin' Tilbury and double-crossin' your own kin! Far's I'm concerned you can go to hell!"

With a baleful look he caught up his hat, gave his gunbelt a hitch and flung himself out of the room.

FOR a long moment Lee stared at the door he had banged shut behind him, wondering if Mark couldn't see the truth or just didn't want to. Plainly he had believed that the weight of public opinion against Tilbury would be strong enough to have enabled him to shoot the latter and get away with it.

Yet Tilbury's attitude had been an indignant, hot-headed kind that seemed to call more for fistic retaliation than the cold, murderous fury with which Mark had so quickly responded. Others might have taken that stand, too, in which case Mark would have found himself in serious trouble, for while Sheriff Meyers was slow getting around, he was conscientious and just.

And on top of it all, didn't Mark realize that for him to kill Tilbury would surely bring Marian's utter, irrevocable hatred upon his head?

Lower in spirits than ever before in his life, Lee made his way to the street. He was in time to see the sheriff's posse go tearing out of town, Mark one of the foremost riders. With never a following glance he bent his own steps towards the Pastime Saloon, where he knew the stage driver would be reveling in free drinks and telling his story over and over. From him, despite an avid audience, he gleaned the main facts of Dan Whipple's abduction.

There had been two bandits, bandanna masked, and they had struck five miles from town as the stage coach crawled up the steep incline from the ford of the river's west fork.

"In my opinion, it was Whipple they was after in the first place!" concluded the driver vehemently. "They wasn't no shipment of money aboard. And it musta been somebody that knowed what a fire-eater the Old Man is, because they didn't take no chances. They slugged him!"

Lee's jaws tightened. "Which way'd they head out?" he queried.

"West," answered the driver. "One of 'em said somethin' about Skyhigh Canyon to the other. He dropped his voice but my ears was sharper'n he figgered." He cackled pridefully, adding, "It's my guess that's where they headed, all right. Where could they find a better hideout?"

It was a question Lee kept turning over in his mind all the while he picked up a scant supply of provisions at the General Store, cartridges for rifle and six-shooter, and a blanket. And when a few minutes later he headed out of town, he thought he had the answer.

Skyhigh Canyon, highest and deepest gorge in the Wolf Mountains, lay in a region so wild and nearly inaccessable that it would take a posse days to comb it. Because of this it would constitute an ideal refuge for desperadoes with a human prize on their hands. And yet, to Lee the idea rang false. Somehow or other, it seemed just a little too pat for the stage driver to have overheard a reference to that particular region. He found himself debating whether or not it could have been a trick.

Although the bandits had headed west, what was to prevent them from turning north through the foothills? A couple hours travel in that direction would take them into the breaks of the Wolf River. And while the roughness of that country was on a smaller scale than that of the Skyhigh Canyon region, it too would hold great possibilities for hiding, since there were no near ranches.

It was, in fact, an area even Lee did not know too well, although it bordered the Diamond X valley and, as boys, he and Mark had passed a lot of time exploring it. They had even made a game of camping out there nights, until they'd stumbled upon an old cabin with the skeleton of its erstwhile owner draped over the doorsill, an Indian arrow protruding from its ribs.

Briefly Lee almost grinned as he recalled the alacrity with which they'd vacated the spot. But the gravity of his quest was too deeply impressed upon him to permit himself to be sidetracked. It occurred to him that the cabin might still be standing, that others might also have discovered it. And it, too, would be a good hideout so long as searchers were laboring in an entirely different direction.

As soberly Lee debated the advisability of following this hunch, a rumble of thunder drew his gaze skyward. There the few grey clouds of earlier afternoon were swelling to a formidable force and darkness. A setting sun glared like an angry red eye through a heavy purple blank. A strong breeze had sprung up, damp with the promise of rain.

"It'll be pourin' in an hour," soliloquized Lee, and found his decision almost made for him as he reined up at the scene of the holdup. The ground was a welter of hoof prints. To follow the trail himself it would be necessary to by-pass the posse and cut sign again somewhere in the hills above, not only a difficult feat but an impossibility once it got to raining.

When this happened, even the posse would find themselves with no trail to follow. Their only course would be to spread out and converge upon Skyhigh Canyon, gambling on the validity of their lead.

Somehow Lee couldn't see himself sharing

that gamble, particularly since their force was adequate without him. With a flash of his old recklessness he reined to the northwest.

IN TWO hours he had skirted town and crossed the river well above it. Darkness found him plodding doggedly through a torrential downpour, depending on lightning flashes to show him the way. For a while these were continuous and he fared well. But after the first fury of the storm had spent itself, he found his glimpse of a wet, glistening world so infrequent as to be of little help.

Chilled and wet to the skin, he was forced at last to the realization that it would be best to hole up somewhere until morning. The only drawback was the improbability of locating a place of shelter in the intense darkness. Lee had almost given up hope when luck took an unexpected hand.

There came a time when he felt the beat of wind and rain abruptly cut off. Cougar halted. Instinctively Lee put out a hand. When he touched rock, cold but dry, he knew they had happened upon the sheltered side of a wall or cliff, and there they would remain.

This last, however, was not to be. Scarcely had he settled himself stoically on his patch of dry ground when above the patter of rain, a new sound fell upon his ears—the clang of a horseshoe on rock, coming not from behind but ahead.

The significance of this flashed through Lee's mind even as he shot erect, hoping to keep Cougar from betraying their presence. He was too late. Before he could find a velvet muzzle in the darkness, the buckskin's whinny rang shrilly through the night.

In the following moment the fall of rain was an eerie whisper. Then out of it came a harsh challenge. "That you, Boss?"

The suspicion and menace in the voice told Lee that his hunch was paying out. Easing his gun out of its holster, he started to work his way along the rock wall with the intention of putting space between Cougar and himself. Three steps he managed in utter silence. Then a vein or rock stretching out like the root of a tree caught at his foot, causing him to stumble. His spurs clinked.

It was a small sound, hardly distinguishable above the swishing downpour, yet it brought death lancing out of the night. Flame blossomed in the dark with a sudden roar. Fragments of rock bit into Lee's right cheek, while his very hair lifted to a ricochet.

He heard Cougar's snort, the pound of hoofs as he backed away in fright. And all the while he himself was moving, dropping flat as the second shot came lancing his way, firing at the flash of his enemy's gun and flopping over with each report of his own.

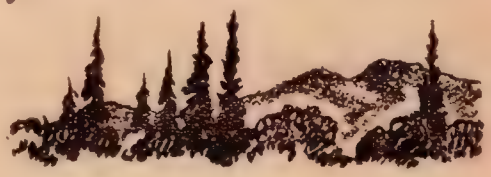
Too fast and intense was that exchange of fire to encompass more than seconds. Yet it seemed to Lee that time immeasureable passed before his gunhammer clicked on an empty chamber, and he realized that his last two shots had brought no retaliation.

FROZEN to the ground, he was slipping shells out of his cartridge belt when he heard a creak of saddle leather, followed by a slithering noise and a dull thud. There came a snort and brief pound of hoofs, as though a horse had shied.

Lee waited. Presently, taking care to make no sound, he crept forward. When at length his groping hand encountered a huddled figure that did not move, he knew that one at least of the bullets he had fired so wildly in the dark had found its mark. At once he searched for a heart-beat and found none. The fellow was dead.

Kneeling in the rain, Lee felt the skin about eyes and mouth tighten. He had witnessed violent death before, had even faced it. But this was the first time he had ever killed.

When he could overcome the icy nausea in his stomach, he dragged the body back to shelter. His first lighted match revealed staring eyes and a bushy shock of dark hair. With the second he gazed down upon the unshaven face of a man who was an utter stranger.



"Enemies out of the past!" he whispered in relief.

Presently he made a discovery. Only the dead man's outer garments were wet, indicating that he had not long been out in the rain. Did that mean the hideout was somewhere close?

If it did, there was no telling what that burst of gunfire might bring down upon him. Lee decided to move. Anchored by trailing

reins, the bandit's horse was easily captured; Cougar came to his whistle. Riding one and leading the other, he pressed on cautiously, and encountered nothing even remotely ominous.

Within ten minutes he had halted again, gaze held by a pinpoint of light in the darkness ahead.

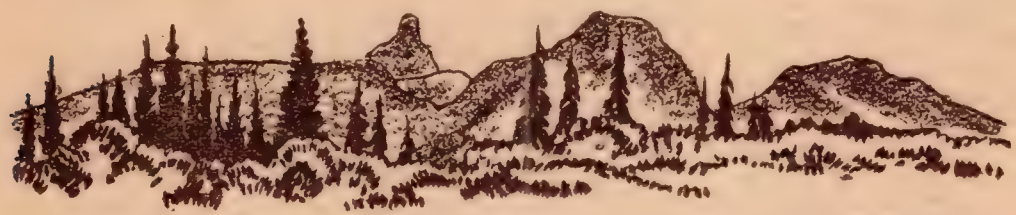
It turned out to be the cabin he and Mark had discovered long ago. A reconnaisance afoot brought out the fact that there were no horses about, although several had been stabled recently in a shed to the rear.

"Maybe that second jasper connected those shots with a posse and lit out," soliloquized Lee.

Cautiously he worked his way to a window, where one peep was sufficient to prove there were no enemies inside. Nothing stirred in the single, squalid room save a bound, white-haired figure on a bunk. Even as Lee's gaze fell upon it, he heard a low moan.

In a matter of seconds he was inside, slashing at Old Man's bonds. So tight had those about his wrists been drawn that the flesh was swollen and lacerated. Lee uttered a deep, rolling curse. And when smears of blood on the Old Man's shirt led to the discovery of a back striped with quirt lashes, the blast of his rage destroyed to the last shred all his compunction for the dead man back on the trail.

AS CAREFULLY he started a search for further hurts, Dan Whipple's eyes opened. In a pallid countenance they seemed more deeply, glitteringly blue than



ever. "'Bout time—somebody got—here," he said, asperity in his voice despite its weakness. "They were—gettin' rough. Tryin' to—make me. . . ." The white head lolled as he slipped back into unconsciousness.

Quickly Lee went over him but found nothing more save a swelling over a temple where he had been slugged. Standing back, he took stock.

The cabin was snug and warm. A generous supply of dry wood was stacked beside the fireplace in which a blaze crackled cheerily. There was even food on some corner shelves. Added to his own provisions, they could make out comfortably until the Old Man regained strength enough to travel. This Lee decided to do, since he knew he dared not take the other out into the rain in his present condition.

The risk of the enemies' return, the second kidnapper or the "Boss" whose appearance the first had seemed to expect, was one that would have to be taken.

It proved a risk that brought no development. For two more days and nights Lee nursed his uncle, and in all that time they might well have been in a world unpeopled save for themselves.

That the "Boss" had, indeed, ventured into the rain-drenched night to keep his rendezvous, that stumbling upon the body of his hireling he had jumped to a panic-stricken conviction that the game was up and fled back to town in the hope of establishing an alibi for himself, was something Lee could not, of course, guess.

It was the second morning before Dan Whipple betrayed any inclination to talk. Then he disclosed little that Lee had not already learned. "Did you recognize either of them?" queried the latter, hoping to have his theory of enemies out of the past verified.

But Whipple shook his head. "All I'm sure of is that they're strangers," he answered. "Gun-toters, imported to pull this job by some hombre who don't aim to be connected with it in any way. Why he's so careful he even arranged to be met out from here for a report on how they was comin' with me. That's where the tall one had started for when pretty soon we heard shootin'." His eyes searched Lee's face keenly. "I reckoned he'd run into a posse, and so did the other jasper because he pulled up stakes in a hurry."

"Guess we did enough blastin' at each other for half a dozen hombres, all right,"

admitted Lee. And he went on to tell of the encounter, explaining how he had happened to search in this direction instead of riding with the posse as had Mark.

"Smart figurin'," said the Old Man.

But somehow to Lee the words lacked a hearty note of sincere thanks or praise. He was telling himself he was imagining things, when the Old Man said abruptly,

"Sounds like the rain's let up. Whether it has or not, though, we're headin' out of here in the mornin'!" And he laid back and closed his eyes to make it clear that he was through with talking.

Afterwards Lee was able to tell himself that he should have expected as much. Now he felt the rebuff too keenly to do more than reflect with bitterness that if he had been Mark, the Old Man would probably have opened up, explained where he had been, why he had been kidnapped and tortured, and whom he believed to be behind it. But he said nothing.

Because he was Lee, the unruly and independent, Dan Whipple meant to keep all this to himself. Instead of finding in this rescue proof of a loyal devotion that deserved confidence and trust in return, he viewed it almost with suspicion. And it was the last that Lee could not stand, to feel himself shut out, the object of no telling how many doubts and wild speculations.

Gazing out upon a wet, grey world, he told himself that his life on the Diamond X had come to an end. It would be unbearable to go on there now. Once the Old Man was safely home he'd pack his belongings, take Cougar and the two other horses that were his own, and fade into the hills where he'd be on his own, to do as he wished.

From there he'd take up the trail of the bandit who had fled, and his boss. The removal of their menace would, in addition to the years he'd made a hand on the Diamond X, compensate the Old Man for his upbringing. Then he would be free to seek a new range.

Thus Lee Cameron brooded, and little dreamed that already Fate had stepped in. How could he guess that a girl would get off the train in Granger that very evening, a girl whose unfaltering spirit would strike an instant response in his heart, and who carried hidden in her bosom a paper that held the destiny not only of himself but of six other people?

IT WAS late the next night before they reached home. Despite the Old Man's fuming Lee had refused to set out until fragments of blue sky showed through shifting clouds, giving proof that the rain was really over. The labor it took to get the other into a saddle made it clear that he was still pretty weak. Which meant they were in for a rough trip, reflected Lee, and was glad they would have no streams to cross.

Wolf River, he knew, would by now be a raging torrent, bristling with debris from the storm-lashed hills, while many of its tributaries would, too, be over their banks. Had any of these stood in their path, they would have been hopelessly marooned. As it was, they could continue to move so long as Dan Whipple's strength held out.

To make the most of it, Lee stopped often to rest, the first time being at the site of his encounter with the bandit. He had, the next morning, placed the body on a rock ledge out of animals' reach. When he took it down now, Dan Whipple scrutinized the dead face and shook his head.

"Never seen him before," he stated. "Reckon that proves Til- whoever's behind this imported a couple varmints to do his dirty work for him." He shot Lee a quick glance, as though to see if the latter had caught his slip of tongue.

Lee had, though he didn't let on. But as he loaded the corpse on Cougar and took it back to the cabin where it would be safer still until the sheriff took it in charge, he reflected grimly that he would have to discard his favored theory of old enemies. It was plain enough now that the Old Man shared Mark's belief in Tilbury's guilt.

Did that indicate truth, too, in Mark's charge that the Old Man had been abducted by someone who believed he had made a new will and was determined to get hold of it? Had he been tortured to force him to disclose its whereabouts?

It was a theory that fitted into the general pattern of events, yet Lee found himself loath to accept it. For years the Old Man had made no secret of how his property would be divided at his death. There was a provision for a life-long pension for Yu San, the old cook, and a bequest for Ben Bowden, who was also named administrator. Everything else went equally to Marian, Mark and himself.

No one else could be affected by a probable

new will. And yet, how could the finger of suspicion be pointed at any of those five?

YU SAN, rheumatic, nearly deaf, and fanatically devoted to his master, was of course completely out of it. The bequest to Bowden, little more than a gesture of friendship, was too small to goad any man into so dangerous a venture as abduction, torture and attempted murder. Outside of Tilbury, in whose innocence he still could not help believing, that left only Marian and Mark.

For the rest of that long, hard day strange and conflicting thoughts tormented Lee, many of which he rejected fiercely, only to have them return again and again. It was with infinite relief that he turned at last into the Diamond X gate.

Already the bunkhouse was dark and silent. In the house only the kitchen windows glowed with light. Yu San, sitting up in the hope of receiving word of his master, thought Lee.

But it was not the small figure of the Chinese he saw pushing open the door. It was Mark.

Evidently he, too, had just come in and was helping himself to a belated supper. Over a thick sandwich in one hand and a cup in the other he stared, jaw dropping. Then, "You found him!" he exclaimed. Putting down his victuals he leaped up to help deposit the Old Man on a chair close to the stove.

Close to exhaustion, the latter had nothing to say as they tugged off his boots and put his feet on the oven door to warm. He refused food, but accepted hot coffee eagerly. As he gulped it, Lee gave a brief account of the rescue.

"That stage driver sure sent us on a wild goose chase!" said Mark disgustedly at its conclusion.

He seemed to have forgotten the unpleasantness of their last moments together. Lee found himself reminded of the boy with whom he had played and who had once saved his life. He wondered how he could have harbored, even for a moment, some of the thoughts that had filed through his mind this very day.

Mark's story was the simple one of a lamed horse. "I walked damn near every step of the way back to town," he said feelingly. "Took me until this mornin' to get there. I was sure played out, so I rolled up in Bramen's hayloft and told him to call me in a couple of hours. The damn fool let me sleep all day. I figgered then I'd better check up on things at home before hittin' out again. I just got in a few minutes ago."

"How's the river?" queried Lee.

Mark gave him a look. "Away up and runnin' wild," he retorted. "You'll never catch me tryin' it again on old Jingo. We damn near didn't make it."

"I'll take Slim and Brownie when I pack that dead jasper into town tomorrow," decided Lee. "They're the best in water. Now—" he glanced at the nodding head of the Diamond X owner—"we'd better get him to bed. Where's Yu San?"

"Sleepin'," answered Mark. "The poor little cuss looked like he hadn't shut an eye since he'd heard of the holdup, so I made him turn in. Dropped right off, too."

DURING this last exchange of remarks they had been moving through the house with the Old Man between them, making for the staircase that led to bedrooms on the second floor. That staircase itself had added fame to the Diamond X. Unusually long and broad and ornate, there was not another like it in the country.

Originally a part of his wife's old, beloved home, Dan Whipple had had it dismantled, shipped West, and installed in the big, rambling ranch house in which she was to spend the rest of her days. With it had come two other heirlooms to gladden her heart—the tall grandfather clock that stood in the hall to the right of the head of the stairs, and a slim-legged, blue upholstered chair that stood to the left.

"Lemme set—a minute!" panted the Old Man, reaching for the chair. The door of his bedroom stood but a few feet way, yet he rested many minutes before he was able to go on. Then, as he sank to the edge of his bed, he said suddenly, "Where's Marian?"

"Asleep, prob'ly," answered Mark, turning down blankets while Lee started to help the Old Man out of his clothes. "Yu San said she's dead beat, too, from sittin' up' and worryin'."

"Well, go see," ordered the Old Man. "If she's just in bed, I want to talk to her."

Mark looked uncomfortable. "Will you fetch her, Lee?" he asked hesitantly. "She's a little sore at me."

He was, Lee knew, putting it mildly for the Old Man's sake. And since he too saw no need

of worrying the latter now with a disclosure of their violent quarrel, he undertook the errand without demur.

Marian's room lay at the end of the long hall, across from his own. A light knock brought no answer. A rustling sound, however, as of someone moving inside, caused him to knock again. Still there came no response. But as he debated whether to turn away or try the door, it opened soundlessly.

In a wrapper, with her hair a dark cloud about her shoulders, Marian stood outlined against the light of a lamp turned low. A finger to her lips implored his silence. Quickly she drew him inside and closed the door.

"Uncle Dan's home," whispered Lee. "Worn out but not hurt bad. He wants to see you."

Apprehension widened her eyes. "I—I heard you coming up the stairs and peeked out," she confessed. Suddenly she clutched his arm, demanding, "Is Mark with him now?"

At Lee's nod her fingers tightened convulsively. "Then he'll be telling Dad about my seeing Gene!" she exclaimed in a hoarse voice.

Again Lee knew the old urge to comfort here. "No, he won't," he said gently. "The Old Man's in no shape to listen to tales tonight. And besides, Mark wouldn't be that mean."

She shook her head despairingly. "You're blind, Lee. Because Mark pulled you out of the creek once when you were kids, you think he's got to be loyal and decent like yourself. But he isn't. He's selfish and even cruel when it'll get him anything he wants."

She swallowed, added pleadingly, "Tell Dad I'm asleep—that he can see me the first thing in the morning. I—I haven't the nerve to face him tonight. Please!"

Lee's bout with his conscience was short. Plainly the past four days had been as hard on her as on any of them, and she was the frailest of the lot. What harm could there be in stretching the truth a bit, if a night's rest would give here a chance to pull herself together?

"I'll tell them you were dead to the world when I looked in," he capitulated.

And he did just that, then turned in himself, undisturbed by even the faintest premonition of the effect of his kindly deception on forthcoming events. For, because of it, Dan Whipple was never to achieve the all-important talk with Marian that would pave the way for Adele Barrett's coming.

Sometime during the night Lee awakened abruptly. For moments he stared into the darkness, wondering what had aroused him. Tired as he was, and with his door shut, it would have had to be a fairly loud noise. But there was nothing now, only the deep silence of a sleeping house.

"Reckon I'm just jumpy," Lee had started to mutter when that silence was broken by a loud thud. Almost simultaneously there came the roar of a single shot.

If there were additional noises Lee did not hear them. His ears were filled with the sounds of his own movements as he leaped out of bed, reaching wildly for trousers. Briefly the darkness hampered him, then he had them on. With no thought for further garments, he snatched up his six-shooter and got out of the room.

Across the hall Marian's door remained unopened. But a glimmer of light from below revealed that others were up and doing. Abandoning his instinctive caution, Lee dashed for the head of the stairs.

He was in time to see Mark, at the foot

of it, putting the chimney on a lighted lamp. Its glow revealed him to be clad only in pants and undershirt. But it revealed something else as well, something that halted Lee in his tracks—a third half-clad figure lying in a heap at the foot of the staircase.

Lee's descending leaps brought into sight a thatch of silvery hair through which a line of red was rapidly widening. As horror gripped him, he heard Mark speak hoarsely.

"He must have thought he heard prowlers and got up to investigate. In the dark he missed the top step. I—I think he's dead!"

ADELE'S father had predicted a hot, dusty stage ride to Bigfork. Instead, she found just the opposite. Although Granger had escaped the storm, within ten miles they were penetrating country that had not. Luckily the rain had ceased to fall by this time. Even the clouds were breaking up,

revealing patches of blue sky and frequent glimpses of the sun.

But since the muddy roads made travel slow and laborious, it was sunset before they pulled into the relay station they should have reached at noon. After a night made comfortable for Adele by the hospitality of the station boss's wife, they went on, reaching the west fork crossing well up in the next afternoon.

"You're going to try to cross?" she demanded incredulously, after one look at that wide stretch of swift-flowing, yellowish water.

"Sure," answered the driver. "This is only a branch, not the main river, which'd really be a dinger. We'll float 'er across here on logs slick as a whistle."

They did, to Adele's surprise and relief. Half an hour later they were rolling down Bigfork's main street, giving her heart another reason altogether for speeding its beat. In a few moments her masquerade would really begin—Adele Brown of Durango, schoolmate of a girl she had never seen.

Sternly she beat down a flurry of last minute trepidations. Of course he'd be on hand to meet her, or at least Marian would. Of course. . . . She was still repeating the assurances mechanically in the back of her mind long after she had failed to find either Dan Whipple or a pretty, dark-haired girl amongst the crowd assembled to greet the delayed coach.

Goaded by silent, curious stares, she moved into the hotel. At the desk, waving aside the pen proffered by a young clerk, she found her voice.

"Thank you, but I don't think I'll stay in town tonight," she said, managing a smile. "I expected to be met, but there's evidently been some delay. Could you tell me if there's anyone from the Diamond X in town?"

"Sure!" answered the clerk eagerly. "Lee Cameron came in an hour ago with the body of one of the jaspers who held up the stage the other day. They say he. . . ."

"Suppose you spare the young lady the gruesome details, Billy?" broke in a new, smooth voice.

SHE turned to find a man at her elbow. Somewhere in his fifties, he had a prominent nose, and eyes that were curiously purplish and opaque. His faultless attire labeled him a professional man of some sort. She remembered having seen him on the hotel veranda when she stepped out of the coach, which meant he had followed her inside. Sudden wariness caused her gaze to cool.

The man said quickly, "Please pardon my boldness long enough for me to introduce myself, Miss. I'm Benjamin J. Bowden, attorney-at-law, and lifelong friend of Dan Whipple. Lately Dan's had some bad luck, so when I happened to overhear you mention the Diamond X, naturally I felt bound to inquire as to what services I might render you in his behalf."

He smiled expectantly, but Adele did not notice. At his reference to Dan Whipple, everything inside had lurched, started to shake crazily. "You mean—something's happened to him?" she faltered.

"I'll say!" burst out the clerk. "First a couple varmints held up the stage and kidnapped him. But his nephew, Lee Cameron, tracked him down, killed one o' the jaspers and scared the other off. Then the first night he was home, the Old Man walked in his sleep or something and fell down the stairs!"

Adele said faintly, "He's—dead?"

"Not yet," answered the lawyer. "Although I gather he's in a pretty bad way. The worst of it is not being able to get a doctor to him. Terry in Granger is down in bed himself, and there's not another within a hundred miles. If it weren't for his Chinese cook, who is very skilled in rough surgery and a knowledge of various herb medicines, I don't think he'd have a chance. As it is, I'm betting on Yu San. So please don't look so alarmed, Miss . . .?"

Suddenly aware of something calculating and probing in his stare, despite his suave tones, Adele made an effort to recover her former poise. "Brown," she told him. "Adele Brown of Durango. I'm an old school chum of Marian's. In the excitement and worry she must have forgotten I was coming."

"No doubt that's it," agreed the lawyer. Glancing at a watch, he continued, "Lee is in the sheriff's office and I expect he'll remain there quite some time. You see, a posse spent several days on the bandit's trail, too, so naturally Sheriff Meyers will be interested in how one man succeeded where so many others failed. However, I'll be happy to inform Lee of your presence at the first opportunity. In the meantime, Miss Brown, may I suggest that you do take a room and get some rest?"

"Sure," piped up the clerk. "There won't

be no gettin' to the Diamond X anyway for a while, on account of the river."

Again he dipped a pen in ink and held it out to her. Since there seemed no alternative at the moment, Adele signed for a room and permitted him to lead her upstairs to it, carrying her two bags. Once she was alone, she washed up and changed to fresh clothing. Yet her every move was mechanical, while her brain struggled against the two shocks it had been dealt.

FIRST there was the news about Dan Whipple. To hear him describe what might happen to him had been exciting and thrilling. To know it had happened was something else. The thought that he might even now be dead or dying filled her with horror, impressed her anew with the importance of the paper entrusted to her care. More than ever she realized the vital necessity of getting it to the Diamond X at once, regardless of obstacles in the way, even a river in flood.

To be in town now, Lee Cameron must have crossed it, she reasoned. And what had been done once, could be done again.

Lee Cameron. With the name Adele came to her second shock, in a way the greatest of the two. Dan Whipple had spoken of rearing Mark and Marian and Lee together, and had given Marian's age as nineteen. Unconsciously she had assumed the boys to be but little older.

The exploits of Lee Cameron, however, as just recounted, were scarcely those of a gangling, untried youth. "Tracked 'em down and killed one of the jaspers. . . ." The words of the clerk rang in her ears, causing her to shiver.

She answered the supper bell only because she feared a failure to do so might arouse unwelcome comment and speculation. The chance of the lawyer, Bowden, seeking to further their acquaintance, loomed as an unpleasant possibility. Instinctively she found herself disliking and distrusting him.

For all his smoothness of speech, his approach had been too obviously designed for the sole purpose of learning her identity with despatch. And this hadn't been prompted by the interest of a flirtatious male in a young, attractive woman. She had never seen eyes more impersonal or chillingly probing.

He came into the dining room after she had seated herself, but to her relief took a place across the table. He did no more than smile and nod, yet she felt, uneasily, that no move she made escaped him. She was glad to head at last back to the promised security of her room.

The Fates, however, had still another jolt in store for her. Light of foot, she ascended the stairs swiftly, stepping into the hall just as a man opened a door to the right and halfway down. For a moment she thought it was her own, and her heart jumped sickeningly. Then, with a startled glance over his shoulder, he went on in, and she realized it was the room next to hers.

"Ninny!" she gasped. "What would he want in your room? How could anyone possibly suspect?"

She had no answer for the last question. It continued to loom in her mind, frightening and unanswerable, even after she had learned beyond the shadow of a doubt that all her personal effects had been thoroughly searched.

The man in the next room? Briefly she recalled an impression of a tall, round-shouldered figure, a thin, hawkish face beneath a black sombrero. "Oh, it couldn't be!" she whispered, and had scarcely uttered the words when she heard the soft opening and closing of a door, followed by furtive footsteps moving down the hall.

Could he have slipped in through a back exit and was now leaving in the same fashion, his mission accomplished?

HOT and cold by turns, she wished fervently for a gun. And her hands clenched as, an hour later, other footsteps approached openly from the direction of the staircase to pause at her door. Lee Cameron, of course, she told herself at the first knock. Yet the second had sounded before she found the strength to turn the key and confront the man in the hall.

And he was just that, came her first wild thought—a man, composed and mature, ages removed from the callow boy she had once imagined him. He was tall. Mud spattered and wrinkled, his clothes had the look of having been soaked, then permitted to dry on him. But they could not hide nor minimize a magnificent pair of shoulders nor a long, lithe body, singularly suggestive of power and quick grace.

He had dark hair, thick and shaggy, and a square chin that had ignored a razor for days. Even through a black, bristling growth,

though, the planes of cheek and jaw were long and sloping, his mouth wide and firm. And out of the whole the blue of his eyes fairly leaped at her.

"Miss Brown?" he asked politely. "I'm Lee Cameron."

"Of course! Marian talked so much about you," prevaricated Adele, managing a smile as she put out her hand.

He accepted it, his gaze somewhat searching. "Bowden told me about you," he replied. "And I. . . . well, I hope you'll pardon this, ma'am, but I was pretty surprised. You see, Marian hadn't mentioned expecting a visitor. But then, she's been mighty upset this past week."

"That must account for it," murmured Adele, and tried valiantly to thrust away a question that leaped into her mind. Suppose Dan Whipple had had no opportunity to inform Marian of the rôle she was expected to play? It was too awful for her to even contemplate.

"Mr. Bowden told me something of what's been taking place," she said resolutely. "I'm terribly sorry. And I'll be glad to help out. I suppose it's too late to think of starting for the ranch tonight?"

He was silent a moment. Then, "Yes, ma'am," he said. "The sky's still overcast enough so there'll be no moon. And in that kind of dark it'd be suicide to tackle the river, runnin' wild like it is. I won't head home until mornin', but even then . . . . well, I'm afraid you'll have to stay here in town a while. Reckon it'll take a week for the water to drop enough so it'll be safe for you to cross."

"A week!" gasped Adele. Her heart almost failed as she thought of the inquisitive lawyer, of the man in the next room and the search her luggage had undergone. The last might have been merely a precautionary check-up, of course, inspired by a general suspicion of all strangers. But would they be satisfied until they'd found a way to search her person, too? They must suspect that she had the will, and they were ruthless people.

IN SUDDEN panic Adele found herself exclaiming, "But I couldn't stay in town a week! I just couldn't!"

"Why not?" demanded he, calmly.

"I—I—" frantically she searched for some plausible reason other than the truth she dared not tell—"why, I—I don't know a soul here!" she burst out desperately. "What would I do with myself?"

As she stumbled into silence, aware that she was sounding foolish rather than appealing, she saw a faint look of scorn enter his eyes.

"I suppose Bigfork would seem pretty dull to some girls," he drawled. "But I'm afraid you'll have to put up with it, Miss Brown. Anybody'd ought to agree it's better to be bored than drowned!"

"But I . . ." Adele's protest faded as understanding hit her.

He thought it was the prospect of a dull stay in a small, uninteresting town that appalled her. Somehow, in her blundering, she'd given him the impression of being pleasure-loving and entirely self-centered.

Unaccountably her heart sank. Yet her brain was quick to spy an advantage. By adding "headstrong" to that not too lovely characterization, might she not manage to win her point after all? What would his opinion of her matter so long as she got to the Diamond X tomorrow without his once suspecting the truth?

"You wouldn't talk like that if you'd ever been bored!" she charged poutingly. "And I don't believe that river could be as bad as you say. You just don't want to be bothered with me!"

Drooping long lashes, she gave him a coy glance—and almost quailed at the look in his face.

"You don't have to take my word for it," he said curtly. "Ask anyone. It wouldn't only be dangerous, but mighty unpleasant to get soaked to the skin and then have to ride ten miles in cold, wet clothes!"

Adele shivered rapturously. "It sounds wonderful! Too thrilling and exciting to miss! I wouldn't stay in this stuffy old town now for worlds. If you don't take me with you. . . ." She lifted her chin in what she hoped was the right angle of defiance and wilfulness. "I'll—I'll get a horse somewhere and try it alone! So there!"

He said nothing, but his two hands clenched, crushing his hat. Her knees started to shake

for in his eyes, more black than blue, lay clearly the wild desire sweeping him—to turn her over his knee with thoroughness and despatch.

Her mouth dried to a quick fear that she had overplayed her part. Then he seemed to regain control of himself.

"I reckon," he said, "that you're just empty-headed litle fool enough to try it, too! And since you're Marian's friend . . .I'm leavin' town at nine, ma'am. Be ready. And no matter how it turns out, remember I warned you!"

Clapping his hat upon his head, he squared about and stalked away.

TORN beneath triumph and a shriveled feeling, Adele slept little that night. Yet she heard no sounds from the next room, neither did any other frightening disturbances occur, so that dawn found her clear-eyed and refreshed.

Quickly she made a small bundle of comb, brush and other toilet articles. Then, wrinkling her nose at the riding habit designed for decorous wear in a side saddle, and which her mother had packed, she sallied forth to the General Store.

Within half an hour she was posing in front of a small mirror in her room, both critical and pleased with herself in flannel shirt, blue denim jeans and jacket, cowboy boots and flat-crowned sombrero. "Mother would never forgive me," she murmured to her reflection, "but at least I'll be able to move."

And that seemed to be Lee Cameron's first thought, too, when presently she opened the door to him. For a moment he stared incredulously, sweeping her trim figure from head to foot. Then he exclaimed, "Well, I'll be darned! I expected to find you rigged up in some fancy long skirt that'd weigh a ton when it got wet. You—you sure look different."

"Thanks," replied Adele, and could not help adding, "So do you."

For while he was still wearing the same clothes, he had taken time out for a shave and haircut. The transformation revealed him to be not over twenty-five, and she found in his face a lean, bronzed sort of good looks that flustered her.

She was glad that he made no last minute attempt to dissuade her. She flushed with pleasure when he nodded approval after mounting her on a tall grey, adjusting her stirrups, then directing her to circle the stable yard.

"That's twice you fooled me, ma'am," he confessed. "You can set a horse, too!"

SIDE by side they rode into the street. With the promise of a glorious day in warm sunshine and a clear sky at last, Adele might have been abundantly happy but for one thing—an awareness of Ben Bowden's eyes amongst the many curious ones that watched them out of town.

Standing on the hotel veranda, he nodded in friendly fashion. There was no sign of the man she had seen in the hall. Yet imagination or intuition connected them, giving rise to so deep a relief to be passing out of their reach that not even the awesome spectacle of Wolf River itself could daunt her.

In silence Lee Cameron watched her face as she gazed fascinatedly at that fearful expanse of rushing, foaming water. Trees and other debris swept by, leaping, turning in the current. Its very roar was a threat.

But at least it was one that she could see and fight, while that behind. . . . "What do I do?" she asked.

Unwilling admiration flickered over her companion's face. "Nothing," he said. "Slim, there, knows more about crossing a river than anybody that ever lived. Just follow me and when Slim starts to swim, slip out of your saddle and catch hold of his tail. Kick your feet and look out for driftwood."

It would not be as simple as it sounded. Adele knew that when she saw the feet swept out from under Lee Cameron's brown before he had taken three steps into the water. In a moment, though, he was swimming strongly. His rider slipped off his back, motioning her to come on.

Kicking feet out of the stirrups, Adele obeyed. Almost at once the water was up to her knees, its chill biting deep. Then the grey, too, was swimming. Carefully Adele lifted herself over the cantle of her saddle, inched backwards until she slid off into the water. The iciness of the bath took her breath away. She whipped downstream with a force that gave birth to a swift fear of being swept away.

But her hands were well tangled in the thick, flowing tail. After a moment she regained confidence, commenced to kick and recalled the warning to beware of driftwood. Her first attempt to glance upstream resulted in

a deluged face. Spasmodically she inhaled water, choked and swallowed a gulp before she could turn her head away. Sneezing, sputtering, they were well out in the stream before she could try it again.

By that time it was too late. Turning her head, Adele merely glimpsed the log a split-second before it struck her. There was a solid impact and a searing pain. Then she felt that she was being whirled crazily, sucked down into a swirling, icy blackness.

She came out of it struggling to breathe, fighting a constriction about her waist that threatened to break her in half. The roar of rushing water still filled her ears. Yet, somehow, she was no longer being rolled over and over in it. Something seemed to have snagged her in midstream, causing the current to buffet her in vain.

As she forced open heavy eyelids, she became aware of a voice crying urgently, "Miss Brown! Can you hear me? You've got to come out of it! Miss Brown!"

GRADUALLY her vision cleared enough to bring Lee Cameron's wet face into focus, close, his eyes peering at her anxiously. It dawned upon her that he must have seen the log hit her, must have turned back and, swimming with the current, managed to overtake her hurtling form. But he had not been able to reach the bank with her.

A sudden cognizance of peril not yet past came to her as he spoke again. "If I let you go, could you hang onto me—not be swept away? I've got to have both hands free to get a better grip before this branch breaks!"

Abruptly she realized that the iron band about her waist was his right arm. His other was lifted in the air, its hand gripping the end of a cottonwood branch. The rise of the river had taken its waters well up the trunks of the trees lining its banks. Many had low limbs extending out over the swollen stream, and it was one of these that he had managed to grab as they were swept beneath it.

But it was a precarious hold, for the slender, leafy tip was apt to break momentarily. And he could not reach for a better one unless his right arm were free.

"I'll—try," whispered Adele. She did get both arms about his waist, but so clumsy were her movements, so lacking in strength her grip, that he loosened his arm about her cautiously.

It was well he did, for at once the pull of the current proved too much for her. She would have been swept away had he not pulled her quickly back to him.

Adele could have sobbed in her despair and impotence. She was trying to tell him to let her go and save himself when a sudden halloo came ringing over the water.

"Someone's spotted us!" cried Lee Cameron with fire in his voice. "He's throwing out a lariat! We'll be out of this in a jiffy, ma'am!"

To Adele, however, it seemed a long time before a rope came swishing out for her to catch. On the bank she glimpsed a horseman dallying the other end about his saddle horn, his experienced cowpony setting itself for the pull.

Then Lee Cameron was saying, "Over your head and under your arms, ma'am. After you're pulled in, he can throw it back to me."

Involuntarily Adele glanced up at the branch to which he clung. Already the tender green bark was splitting. Any second, perhaps even before a freed right hand could be quick enough to secure another grip, it would break. And no living creature sucked again into this river's fierce maw would ever survive.

WITH frantic haste she lifted the widened loop, dropped it not only over her own head but over his, too, and worked it down under the arm clasping her. Her own arms she lifted above it, reaching around his neck.

"It might not hold us both!" warned Lee Cameron sharply. "Suppose it breaks?"

With the tightening rope wedging them together, and a clear understanding of the risk in her eyes, Adele said steadily, "I got you into this. We go together—either way!"

"You . . ." he began. Then a sudden *swoosh* ended his protest and water closed over their heads. The twig to which he clung had broken.

A kindly Providence saw to it that Adele remembered little of what followed. When at last the darkness cleared, and she was through with retching, she became aware of a voice. "Reckon she's just bruised and half drowned," it was saying. "There's no bones broke."

"Who is she, Lee?" queried a second speaker.

The answer was slow in coming, almost as though from one who spoke to himself. "I'm not sure. I thought at first she was an empty-

headed little fool. Then she turned out gritty as hell!"

Galvanized by a strange surge of warmth through her chilled body, Adele sputtered, attempted to sit up. Instantly strong hands helped her. Pushing back the wet masses of her hair, she saw Lee Cameron kneeling at her side.

There was a bloody scratch on his forehead. He looked almost as bedraggled as herself, yet he was obviously unharmed. The realization sent relief coursing through her, so strong as to catch up her heart.

Before she could grasp the meaning of this phenomenon, he said, "Our horses made it across all right, ma'am. And this is the gent who pulled us out—one of our neighboring ranchers, Gene Tilbury. Gene, this is a friend of Marian's—Miss Adele Brown."

Dumbly Adele acknowledged the introduction. But it was lucky, she thought wildly, that normal behavior would scarcely be expected of her at this moment. For this revelation of the identity of their rescuer had proved the last straw to complete her present demoralization.

Tilbury! This young cowboy with the frank, boyish face and honest eyes the ruthless killer Dan Whipple had described with such hate?

Suddenly and overwhelmingly she knew that she had been told a bitterly prejudiced account of the affair, that while the Diamond X owner might have really believed what he said, his sincerity would not make it all true. How would she come out, stepping into a situation far different from the one she had been led to expect?

She learned the answer to that within minutes of arriving at the Diamond X. Carried into the house because she could no longer hold herself up, she was deposited on a sofa. For a moment it was heaven just to lie still. Eyes closed, she felt herself starting to drift off into a mist.

Then suddenly, from far away, came the sound of a girl's voice. "There must be some mistake, Lee! I've never seen this girl before in my life. What's more, I've never known an Adele Brown—ever!"

Down the corridors of Adele's ebbing consciousness the words echoed with a horrible, mocking ring. She stopped trying to fight off the mists closing about her. They became suddenly a refuge she welcomed eagerly until complete darkness closed fast about her.

AN HOUR later found the three Diamond X heirs gathered in the living room. "What do you make of her, Lee?"

As the latter hesitated over a reply, Mark burst out. "Somethin' fishy, you can bet on that! You should of listened to me and made her talk before puttin' her to bed like a guest of honor."

Lee looked at him. "Far as I'm concerned, that's what she is," he said quietly. "I'd prob'ly still be in Wolf River if she hadn't shared that rope instead of lookin' out just for herself. For my part, she don't have to explain anything until she feels like it. Chances are it's only a mixup anyway."

"That's how I feel, too," Marian said.

And since arguments proved useless, Mark was forced to desist.

But he didn't like it. It seemed that something new was always cropping up to deepen his uneasiness. Sometimes he almost wished he had never gotten into it. But it had sounded so easy and safe when Bowden first outlined the plan, and the thought of losing both Marian and her share of the ranch to Gene Tilbury had been more than he could stand.

"Just wait until that nester gets his hands on Marian's third and starts telling you and Lee how to run the Diamond X!" had chuckled Bowden. And Mark had felt all the fires of hell burst into flame in his blood.

"I'll kill him first!" he'd ground out, only to have the lawyer laugh again.

"There's a smarter way," he'd declared, and had gone on to explain.

Just one shot fired close to the Old Man would pull the trick. Lay it on Tilbury, and with one stroke put an unforgivable barrier between him and Marian, and transform the Old Man's present opposition into an enmity that would never die.

Simple, and so safe. Only it hadn't turned out that way. In the first place, Marian had refused to believe the charge. In the second, the Old Man's wrath hadn't fallen upon Tilbury alone. When he'd stated a determination to make a new will that would force Marian, Lee and Mark to obey his wishes or cease to be his heirs, Mark had known how devastatingly his plot had boomeranged.

For it was not the Old Man's way to voice idle threats, and there was no telling what sort of provisions he would devise. Panic-stricken at the thought of losing out entirely, he had seen his only chance in preventing a new will from coming into existence.

WELL, he had tried again, but with no more success. Then the Old Man had slipped away, leaving him to face the realization that he had gambled wildly and lost. Somehow Bowden had wormed the whole story out of him. The next thing he knew they were deep in plans to save the situation.

Bowden knew of a pair who'd take on any kind of a job for a price. They'd watch for the Old Man and grab him on the way home. Should he be too smart to be carrying the will, they'd wring the truth of its whereabouts from him. Once it was destroyed the Old Man's body could be found, and if the right words were whispered about beforehand, who would get the blame but Tilbury?

Again it had seemed a perfect setup. And again things had gone wrong. Lee had rescued the Old Man before Hunter and Spade had really gotten to work on him, and Hunter had lost his life. And while the Old Man's fall on the stairs had proved advantageous in one way, it held a menace in another.

Suppose he died before they laid hands on that will, then it turned up to rob him of everything for which he'd kowtowed and played a part most of his life?

As always, the thought brought the burn of rage and hate to his veins, a sweat of apprehension to his brow. And now there was this strange girl to worry about. Bowden had not overlooked the possibility of a messenger being employed to try and slip the document past them. Could that be this Adele Brown's purpose?

Fantastic as the idea seemed, Mark found it staying with him. And when evening came to find him still blocked from learning anything about her by Marian's and Lee's insistence that she not be disturbed, he could stand it no longer. In town Bowden would surely have done some investigating. High water or not, he had to get in on the results.

After a brief hesitation he went to his uncle's door and knocked. He was refused admittance, but the sparse information on the the Old Man's condition elicited from the aged Yu San put an even deeper frown on his face as he went to the corral for a horse. Within an hour he reined up at the river's edge.

Since the sky was clear at last, there was a moon to facilitate his crossing. He undressed, and was even able to keep clothes and gun dry by rolling them into a tight bundle and holding it above the water with one hand. In a short time he dismounted in front of Bowden's house.

A light in a side window took him around to the back. There, hidden from the street by a lilac bush, stood a saddled horse with head drooping wearily. When his knock admitted him to a small room, furnished as a study, he found Spade with Bowden.

The gunman's clothes were wet, as though his crossing of streams had been hurried. Like his mount outside, he too showed the rigors of a long, hard trip.

Though Mark's curiosity flared, he had no chance to put it into words. "How's the Old Man?" asked the lawyer quickly.

The newcomer scowled. "All I know is what Yu San gives out. He won't let nobody stick their nose in the room. But he said tonight the Old Man had come to a little bit then fell asleep. So it sounds like he's goin' to make it."

"Too bad." Bowden pursed his lips. "If only he'd shot himself when he fell, instead of just touching the trigger off to bore a hole in the wall. . . . But I guess we'll get by anyway, seeing how everything else is shaping up according to specifications."

HIS expression would have been smug had it not been for the glitter in his eyes. "That girl get out to the ranch all right?" he queried softly.

Mark's own eyes narrowed. "That's what I came in about," he answered, and told all he knew of Adele's coming to the Diamond X. When he revealed Marian's denial of ever having known her, Bowden nodded in satisfaction.

"That clinches it!" he exulted.

"You mean you know what it's all about?" demanded Mark eagerly.

"Not only that, but even how to go ahead," retorted the lawyer. "I checked up on the girl here because I wasn't taking a chance on any strangers, even females. Her story about coming to visit Marian sounded all right, but when she heard something had happened to the Old Man she got too upset and tried too hard to hide it. That made me suspicious, so

I had Spade search her luggage while she was at supper. He didn't find anything, but that would only mean she was carrying it on her, if at all.

"We already knew from the depot agent at Granger that the Old Man had bought a ticket for Denver when he left. Since George Barrett is the biggest lawyer there, I've figgered all along he's the one Dan went to. Well, I've got connections in Denver, too. So playing a hunch, I had Spade ride to Granger, send off some telegrams and wait for answers. He damn near killed four horses, coming and going, but he got in not five minutes ago with just the information I expected. Barrett's daughter, Adele, left home a short time ago to visit a school chum in Montana!"

"Then that girl is Adele Barrett and she *did* have the will on her!" Mark's blood was suddenly leaping through his veins. "That's why she took the risk of swimming the river rather than waiting for the water to go down!" A sudden suspicion hit him. "D'you suppose she told Lee the truth? And what about Marian? She undressed her and put her to bed, and she never mentioned finding any papers on her."

"Marian would be too finicky to examine them if she did," said the lawyer dryly. "They'd be wrapped in oilskin, of course, and she'd figure she didn't have a right to open the package. And it doesn't matter what the Barrett girl told Lee. We know the will's out at the Diamond X now. We know we've got to get it, and make sure there's nobody left to talk!"

"You mean—even Marian?" whispered Mark.

"Unless you're damned sure you can handle her!" decreed the lawyer. "Meyer is hanging onto that holdup like a bulldog. Unless he gets hold of what he thinks is the guilty party damn soon, he and Lee together will be uncovering our trail. That means we're in too deep to quit now. We've got to go through with it, and pass the buck onto Tilbury!"

FOR a long moment Mark stared at him. He had not counted on wholesale murder, particularly with Marian one of the victims. But maybe it would not be necessary to go that far. She was timid and easily frightened. Maybe terror would give him the mastery over her that he had hitherto never been able to obtain.

As for the others. . . . Well, it was himself he had to look out for first, himself and his accomplices. For he didn't dare turn on them and they wouldn't let him quit now that it was no longer a matter of a fat price for services rendered, but the biggest stake of all—saving their own necks.

"How?" he asked harshly. "And when?"

"First thing in the morning," answered Bowden. "The punchers should be out to work then. If there's any still around you can send them off on some job. Spade and I will wait in the timber until you signal us in."

"What about Tilbury?"

Cold humor flickered in the lawyer's eyes. "He'll be there, too. Like all fool punchers, his two have to get to town every so often, even if a flooded river stands in the way. They're in the Pastime right now, so there's nothing to prevent you and I and Spade from going out to Bobcat Canyon and gathering Tilbury in.

"After the job's done, Spade will fade out of the country," he continued. "Worried about my old friend, Dan Whipple, I will have braved the river early in the morning and arrived at the Diamond X in time to find you, Mark, the sole survivor of a terrible battle.

"Half the people in the country already believe Tilbury tried twice to murder the Old Man. Why should they doubt the explanation we give out—that Tilbury, after brooding for days over his failures and fancied wrongs, appeared at the Diamond X with the intent of forcing the Old Man and Marian to concede to his wishes at the point of a gun; that meeting defiance and determined opposition, he went suddenly berserk?

"Why just think, Mark. If I hadn't arrived unexpectedly in time to get him, he'd have killed even you—wiped out every living soul in sight!"

The evilness of the plan, its airtightness, left nothing more to be said. Ten minutes later the unholy trio made a stealthy withdrawal from town. After crossing the river in the same fashion as had Mark previously, they headed rapidly northward.

Halting to breathe their horses where a fork of the road led to Bobcat Canyon, Bowden had started to give out instructions for the advance upon Tilbury's cabin, when they became aware of the tread of approaching hoofs.

"Someone from the Diamond X!" exclaimed Mark.

"Over behind those bushes until we learn

who it is!" commanded the lawyer sharply.

HIDDEN, with hands ready at their horses' noses, the trio listened to the sounds of a rapid approach. The rider passed them presently, his tall shape in the saddle and the silhouette of head and shoulders unmistakable in the moonlight.

"Lee!" hissed Mark. "Where's he goin'?"

"To hell!" answered the lawyer. "He might have talked to the Old Man or the girl—be on his way to tell Meyers something that'll cook our goose! Spade. . . ."

The gunman needed no further instructions. With a leap he was in his saddle, spurring after the man who had robbed him of the prisoner taken off the stage, the man who had killed his partner.

Tensely, the pair left behind waited. The drumming of hoofbeats drew far away, and then suddenly they heard it—the single crack of a gun. Twisting bridle reins in a grip that hurt, Mark waited for another. But that diminishing tattoo of hoofs simply faded into silence. He cursed, feeling a nerve jerk at the corner of his mouth.

"Shut up!" hissed the lawyer.

From out of the night came a new, electrifying sound, that of a single horse coming back.

An eternity later Spade rejoined them. "A cinch!" he asserted, hard satisfaction in his voice. "He pulled up kind of cagey to see who was coming. But I blasted him before he could even guess what was up. Don't know how hard he was hit, but it don't matter. His foot hung in a stirrup when he fell. Time that bronc stops runnin', Mr. Lee Cameron's head will be battered to a pulp!"

ADELE'S first awakening sensation was one of delicious warmth. Briefly she lay still, luxuriating in it, then moved to discover that she was sore from head to foot. When she stretched experimentally an excruciating ache in her left side took exploring fingers to that region.

But they encountered nothing to suggest a serious injury. Just a bruise, she reflected drowsily. That log must have struck her merely a glancing blow. . . .

Her wandering thoughts came to an abrupt halt. Lee Cameron and the river—Gene Tilbury, who had pulled them out—Marian Whipple's bewildered voice, "But I've never known an Adele Brown, ever!"

As full recollection came storming back, Adele realized that hours must have passed, for a lighted lamp stood on a chest of drawers close by. She was in bed, clad only in a warm flannel gown. She had, it was plain, been given quick, kindly care.

Yet, and it was this point that caused her heart to take up a mad beat, the person she had to thank for it must have discovered the document she had carried beneath her clothing!

Sitting up, Adele's gaze swept the room wildly in search of her wet garments. They were nowhere in sight. But in a rocker on the other side of the bed sat a pretty dark-haired girl she knew could be only Marian Whipple.

Adele's involuntary move to throw back the blankets froze. Grey eyes and brown met, held. Then the other girl said unexpectedly, "If it's that oilskin packet you're worried about, you'll find it under your pillow. It's safe."

Adele's response was almost convulsive. Deafened to anything the other might have been about to add, she drew forth the slim package, examined it quickly for signs of having been opened or damaged by water. When she found neither, her relief was tremendous.

"Does anyone else know about this?" she inquired.

"I didn't tell anyone, if that's what you mean," answered the other girl. "I knew it was important or you wouldn't have carried it as you did. And I didn't feel that I had the right to mention it until—well, until you'd had a chance to explain. We owe you that much because Lee said that if you hadn't shared Gene's rope with him, he might have—"

"Gene!" interrupted Adele. "Gene Tilbury! That's what Lee—Mr. Cameron called the man who saved us. I'd certainly like to thank him, if he's still around. Is he here now?"

For a long moment it seemed the other girl would not answer. Then, as though the words burst out in spite of her, "Gene didn't help Lee bring you home! He wouldn't dare come here on account of Dad and Mark! They said at first he was no-good and a fortune hunter. Now, since Dad got hurt, Mark claims—everybody—"

She caught herself, face white and taut, eyes widening with fear.

PITY filled Adele. Even before this outburst she had noted signs of emotional strain in Marian Whipple's face. It had seemed too thin, and colorless beneath its outdoor tan. The big dark eyes had had a distant look, as though only part of her mind dealt with the present, while the other battled some secret problem of which she dared not speak.

And that this last was true Adele knew for a certainty now, for otherwise it would not have been so easy to sidetrack her from the explanation she had every right to expect at once. A little ashamed of her own trickiness, yet driven by the need of somehow feeling her way to a decision, Adele went on in a low tone.

"I heard in town what happened to your father. And I gathered, too, that Gene Tilbury is being blamed for it. But after meeting him today I can't believe he is guilty. He's so young, with such a nice, honest face and eyes. I'm sure he must be a fine person."

"Oh, he is!" Of a sudden Marian was sitting on the bed, clasping both Adele's hands fiercely. "That's what Lee thinks, too—what we've tried to tell Dad! But he doesn't want to believe it. All he cares about is Mark, and Mark hates Gene because I love him."

Again she appeared to realize what she was blurting out to a stranger. The rich color that had flooded her face receded. "Who are you?" she whispered. "Why did you come here?"

Impulsively Adele put an arm about her shoulders. "I'm going to tell you all that, Marian," she said gently. "But first, will you try to believe that I want to be your friend?"

A long time Marian looked at her. "I think I'd like to believe that," she said presently, alarm fading out of her eyes. "Besides, Lee's judgment is good enough for me. And he said that for his money you'd do to ride the river with any day."

A slow, deep thrill swept through Adele. Unable to account for it, and a little afraid to try, she said breathlessly, "I—I think he must be pretty fine, too. The chance of the rope breaking was small compared to the one he took when he plunged back into the river after me." Regaining outward composure, she added, "Is he at home? I think he's entitled to hear my story, too. And what about Mark?"

An expression almost mask-like came over Marian's face. "He left for town an hour ago," she said. Then, in an entirely different tone, "But Lee's with the boys in the bunkhouse. I'll bring him right up."

Swift embarrassment caught at Adele's throat. "Oh, not here!" she protested, as the other girl rose to her feet. "I'll go downstairs, if you've got some clothes I could borrow."

"Of course," Marian assured her. "But I don't think you'd better get up before morning at least. Wait!"

On swift feet she left the room, returning a few minutes later carrying a short frilly jacket with long, billowy sleeves, which she helped Adele into, then fastened in front with bows of blue ribbon.

"There!" she exclaimed in satisfaction. "I brushed your hair as soon as it dried, and you look just lovely with it curling over your shoulders the way it is now. The lamplight makes it more gold than brown, and you've actually got color in your cheeks. They're pink as wild roses!"

She left before Adele's newly acquired color developed into a full scale blush. And it was with difficulty that the latter pulled her thoughts back to the more serious side of the situation.

Three things she had learned in the course of their talk. First, that Marian was deeply, truly in love with Gene Tillbury. Second, that she adored Lee Cameron as if he were her brother. Third, that she not only hated Mark but distrusted him as well.

And yet it was Mark the Old Man wanted her to marry. Why? Because Mark was his favorite, of course, and favored the match, so he had decreed that Marian must favor it, too. Any ideas to the contrary were discounted as girls' "foolish notions."

RECALLING the terms of the new will, Adele found a wave of indignation engulfing her. Plainly she saw it now for what it really was—a club to be held over the head of Marian particularly. He had believed she would give in rather than permit the Diamond X to pass out of the hands of all three, had believed that Lee would exert his influence on her rather than see his own share slip away.

In other words, what Dan Whipple wanted he meant to have. That, even more than a desire to thwart a would-be killer's plan, had taken him to George Barrett in Denver. Un-

knowingly her father had drawn up an instrument of coercion and injustice, and she had risked life and limb to deliver it to a stubborn old despot.

But perhaps that wasn't quite true, argued an inherent fairness suddenly. If Dan Whipple truly believed Gene Tilbury had tried to murder him, he couldn't be blamed for taking drastic steps to prevent his winning of Marian. And one thing was certainly not to be denied. There *was* a killer somewhere in the offing, someone desperately anxious to lay hands on this new will, to learn its content and, if need be, to destroy it.

Lee, Marian and Tilbury. As quickly as the names passed through her mind, she eliminated them. Both Lee and Tilbury had had plenty of time to search her and take the document while she lay unconscious on the river bank. Marian had actually found it and passed it up.

That left Mark the only one vitally concerned.

To Adele it did not seem incongruous that she should, almost in the same moment, accuse and convict a man she had not yet seen. Everything pointed his way, even to the lawyer, Bowden's, part in the puzzle.

Hadn't Dan Whipple mentioned a falling out with the latter? Take one man with a grievance and another in fear of losing a coveted inheritance, and what would be queer in their combining forces for profit and revenge? And hadn't Marian as good as said that Mark hated Tilbury because she loved him? Jealousy. Another motive for Mark.

Almost convinced that she had hit upon the truth, Adele was wondering how to go about removing the last bit of doubt when there came a knock on the door, followed by a request for admittance in Marian's voice.

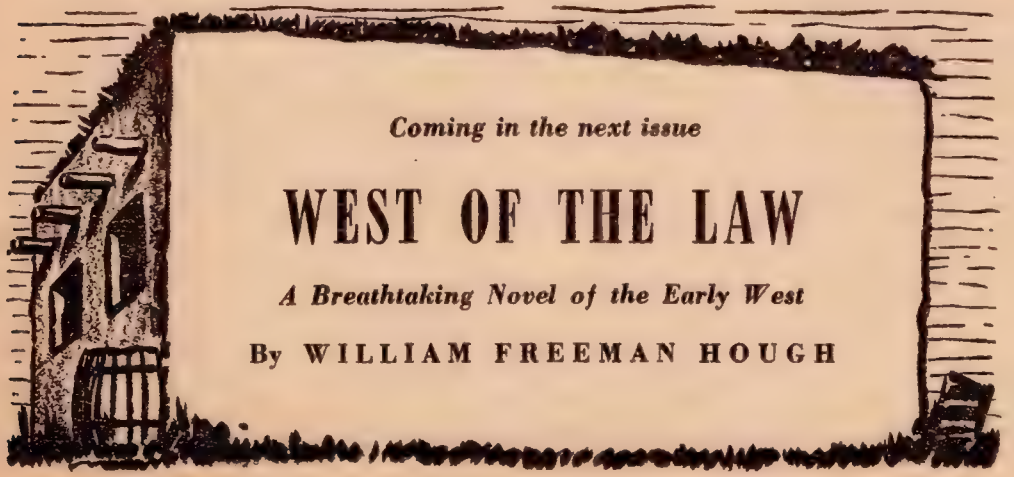
"C-come in!" called Adele quickly, and found all her speculations shoved away by the accelerated beat of her heart.

SHE had thought that this first moment of facing Lee Cameron again would be the hardest ordeal of her life. But it wasn't. She might really have been an expected, honored guest from the way he came straight to her, smiling. "I'm glad to see you lookin' so well, ma'am," he said with simple sincerity. "You had a mighty close call with that log."

"And deserved it, too," finished Adele. "At least that's what you must have thought at the time, yet you turned back to save me." As his tanned face commenced to take on a coppery tinge, she continued quickly, "I'm not going to embarrass you with a lot of thanks, I've got a better way of proving my gratitude. But first—well, you've got to understand that I'm not really the kind of girl I seemed to be when I practically forced myself on you in town."

It was her turn to grow embarrassed. She found herself fumbling, plunging into her story without a thought of logical sequence.

"It wasn't that I'd be bored in town," she blurted. "I was afraid to stay there. First that little man asked a lot of questions. Then my luggage was searched while I was down to supper. I almost caught the man who did it. He heard me coming and went into the



next room, pretending he was a hotel guest, too. But I heard him come out a few minutes later and sneak out the back way. I think he came in that way, too, and waited in that room until I left mine. Then he came over and searched it."

Lack of breath forced her to pause. Marian, sitting on the edge of the bed, stared at her in complete bewilderment. In the rocker Lee leaned forward with chin in hand, the blue of his eyes more vivid than ever with understanding and a gleam of keen speculation.

"Suppose you start at the beginning," he said quietly. "Tell us who you really are and how you happened to get mixed up in our little mess."

He knew, then, that she was just an innocent bystander whom a strange quirk of Fate had involved in a drama that did not remotely concern her. She would not have to tell her story in the disheartening face of skepticism and suspicion.

The relief was almost more than Adele could bear. "Thank you," she said huskily. "I'll be able to do that now."

With no further hesitation she revealed her true identity, recounted the story told by Dan Whipple in her father's office. At the disclosure of the terms of the new will Marian's lips tightened, while Lee smiled sardonically. But neither spoke until she came to the masquerade devised for herself.

Then Marian interrupted whitely, "That must be what he wanted to see me about the night he—he fell!"

Lee nodded. "I'm afraid so, honey. And if he had, we'd been on hand to meet Miss Barrett and no one would of had a chance to get nosey." To Adele he added, "Who was the man that asked the questions?"

When she told him he did not look surprised, although his jaw hardened. He said, "And could you describe the one you think searched your room?"

"He was tall and round-shouldered," answered Adele. "His face was thin with a long, hooked nose, and he wore a black, floppy-brimmed hat."

Marian looked disappointed. "I can't place him," she said. "Can you?"

APPEALED to, Lee nodded slowly. "Yes. One evening after the Old Man had been away a couple of days, I went to Bowden's house to ask if he'd got any word from him. There was a light in the back so I went around to that door. An hombre like Miss Barrett described was just leavin'. Bowden said he was a drifter who'd come to hit him up for a job because somebody'd told him he owned a ranch besides his law practice. It struck me funny at the time because Bowden don't own a ranch, and why should a stranger go to his house at night for a job, if he did? But I was worried about the Old Man and thought no more about it until now. If that jasper's still in the country, though, and layin' low. . . ."

He did not finish, but a steeliness came into his eyes. Had either of the girls been able to read his mind, they would have found certain of Dan Whipple's words there. "All I'm sure of is that they're strangers. Guntoters imported to pull this job by someone who wants to be sure he can't be connected with it in any way!"

He said abruptly, "Do you suppose it could have been him the Old Man heard snoopin' around that night?"

"No," said Marian, and started to shake. "It—it was me." She put a hand to her throat as vocal chords refused to function further.

Again Adele felt a surge of almost unbearable pity. It was a relief to hear Lee say soothingly, "I can guess, honey. You were slippin' out to meet Gene."

Wordlessly Marian nodded. Then, moistening her lips, "We were going to elope!" she whispered. "That's how Gene happened to be at the river in time to pull you out. I was supposed to meet him at the crossing whenever I could slip away. He—he must have waited all night for me."

"And what kept you from meetin' him?" pursued Lee gently.

"Mark." Marian shuddered, swallowed hard. "Remember I told you he'd been watching every move I made? Well, he—he caught me downstairs and grabbed me in the dark. I don't see how I kept from screaming. Too scared, I guess. Anyway, when he saw my bag he knew I was running off with Gene. He—he went crazy mad—said if I was marrying anyone it'd be him—that he'd fix me so I'd be glad to!"

Again her hand went to her throat. But she continued doggedly, "He put a hand over my mouth and started to drag me outside. I—I guess I went a little crazy, too, because somehow I broke away. I ran from my room

and he chased me. I'd been carrying my boots and he was barefooted, so we didn't make any noise until we got to the top of the stairs. He'd have caught me there, but I threw the blue chair in his way, tripping him. That was the noise that aroused Dad."

"And that was what he fell over—the blue chair!" exclaimed Lee. "Mark figured he'd come out to investigate and left it there!"

Marian nodded. "He told me next morning that if Dad died it would be my fault. He said he'd hidden my boots and bag and picked up the chair, and he'd let it appear an accident if I'd marry him. If I didn't, he said he'd see that everyone believed I'd tried to murder Dad—that I'd been in with Gene from the start, trying to get rid of Dad so we could get married and have a share of the ranch, too!"

Sobbing, she covered her face with her hands.

IN A fierce gesture Adele drew the slight, wracked figure into her arms. "He was bluffing, dear!" she said staunchly. "Nobody would believe anything so vile! He couldn't make them, could he, Lee?"

The latter unclenched the tightness of his jaw. "He'll never get a chance to try," said Lee quietly. "I promise you that, Marian."

After the violence of her sobbing abated, he drew her to her feet, wiped her eyes. "No wonder you're all nerves, carrying a load like that!" he scolded gently. "You should have bucked up and told me sooner. But I'm carryin' it now, so you go to bed and forget it, hear? Everything's going to be all right!"

So strong and confident was the assurance that Adele found her own spirits lifting. But the change in Lee, after Marian had obediently retired, revealed a deep, emotional disturbance.

"It's Mark—all the way through," he said, almost as though to himself. "Everything's pointed to him ever since that first attempted bushwhackin'. I've seen it in other ways, too, and refused to believe because we were raised together, because he pulled me out of the creek once when we were kids."

He stopped, placed a hand over his eyes. In that moment Adele hated Mark, not so much for his ruthless selfishness as for the winning side with which he had evidently been able to hide it from all save Marian.

Her throat tightened as she gazed at the man leaning forward in the rocker, his dark, bowed head close. She had a sudden, aching desire to reach out and stroke it comfortingly.

Just in time she checked the motion, said falteringly, "I'm so sorry, Lee. It must be pretty bad to find that someone you've loved and trusted. . . ."

He took down his hand. "It's not only me," he said earnestly. "It's the Old Man! Mark's his favorite. That's the main reason I've fought off what's tried to stare me in the face all along."

In a low voice he started to talk, and Adele let him, for she knew it would ease the bitter pain of disillusion to pour it out. He told of Mark and Marian's quarrel the day of the holdup, the thoughts it had stirred to life, how close Mark had come to killing Gene Tilbury in town immediately afterward.

"I argued then that Mark had just lost his head," he went on. "But I know better now. When he learned that his two gunmen had got hold of the Old Man at last, he figured the new will was as good as in his hands. He jumped at a chance to kill two birds with one stone—get rid of a man he hated and at the same time make sure he was a scapegoat who'd never be able to speak in his own defense!"

HE WENT on, then, telling of Dan Whipple's rescue. And when he described the quirt marks on the latter's back, his voice shook so with rage and pity that Adele could stand it no longer. Impulsively she laid a hand on one of his.

A gesture inspired wholly by the depths of her sympathy, it turned with incredible swiftness into something else. For the hand she touched released its grip on the rocker arm, turned and captured her own. Adele's heart leaped into her throat as she felt it squeezed tight. Then that incredibly blue gaze plunged deep into hers.

"You're sweet!" said Lee Cameron huskily. "Taking all that trouble and risk for an old man's sake—still tryin' to help. There's one thing I want you to know, ma'am. No matter how this turns out, there'll be one bright spot in it—meetin' you! I've known. . . ."

The magic of the moment was dispelled by a knock on the door. In a moment Marian entered, wearing a wrapper with a second similar garment over one arm and a pair of moccasins in her hand.

"Dad's awake! she announced excitedly.

"Yu San just called me—said he'd asked if Miss Brown had gotten here yet and wanted to see her."

"Then he's going to be all right?" cried Adele.

"I think so," answered Marian. "Anyway, Yu San asked me to fix him some broth—said he couldn't leave him. I don't know why. So Lee, you show Adele to Dad's room, will you?"

"Right," consented he, and followed her into the hall.

There Adele joined him a moment later, the wrapper belted tight about her slim figure, the oilskin packet held openly in her hand. Scarcely glancing at it, Lee showed her down the hall to a door opposite the head of the stairs.

"I'll be sayin' good night now," he said. "Your work's finished. Mine's just begun. And please don't be afraid. With ten punchers in the bunkhouse, there'll be no tricks tried here tonight. By tomorrow . . . well, maybe it'll be over."

As he turned away, enlightenment burst upon her. "You're going to town after Mark?" she demanded, catching his arm.

"What else?" he countered. "You can't expect me to sit still waitin' for him to move, can you?"

"But he's not alone!" burst out Adele. "He has confederates! That man I saw in the hall—Bowden!"

He nodded. "Bowden's another reason I'm goin' to town. I want to get a line on his part in this and what he expects to get out of it. But don't worry. I'm not goin' to storm into them like a darned fool and lay myself wide open!"

He smiled down at her reassuringly.

Still her fingers clung to his arm. She found it impossible to let him go. "Lee," she said, and stopped.

What was there to say to a man you had known only a few hours, a man your head said was a stranger and your heart argued was not?

"I don't know what I'm trying to say," she stammered. "I—"

"Maybe," he said softly, "it's this!" Bending his head, he laid his lips on hers.

AFTER he had gone Adele stood still, telling herself that it hadn't happened. He couldn't have kissed her, then taken her in his arms and kissed her again, while she returned his caresses as though all her life she had waited just for them. Such things didn't actually happen. You didn't fall in love simply by a meeting of eyes, a touch of hands and lips. . . .

The opening of the door behind her broke into her tumultuous thoughts. Turning, she saw a small, bent figure and a pair of bright eyes in a wrinkled face. "Come in," said Yu San, beckoning.

The room she stepped into was big and well-furnished. Yet she noted it only subconsciously, for her gaze was caught instantly by the figure in the bed. Save that he was propped up by pillows and wore a bandage around his head, Dan Whipple looked little different from when she had first seen him. Certainly he did not resemble a man at death's door.

"But I thought. . . ." She caught herself.

"I see you got here with it," he said, nodding towards the packet in her hand. "But ain't you kind of careless, carryin' it in the open that way?"

Adele almost answered, "There's no one around now with designs on it. Mark's in town."

But she remembered in time that it was not her place to make such accusations and disclosures. Saying nothing, she gave it to him. And it was not until he began to examine the enclosed paper that she saw his question from a new angle.

"I thought you said the will would be safe as soon as it was in this house," she said slowly.

He looked at her. "I did. But it seems I figgered wrong in more than one way." He hesitated. She was surprised to note a perceptible tremble in his hands.

"You've done me a big service, Miss," he continued presently. "So I reckon I owe it to you to keep layin' my cards on the table. All along I've believed I had only Tilbury to look out for. That's why I thought the will would be safe as soon as I got it home, why I thought the stage holdup wouldn't amount to any more than a search of my pockets. If I had slipped it past them, you see, it wouldn't do Tilbury any good to know where it was hid because for him to try to get in here would be riskier than holdin' up a bank. I figgered all the danger was from outside, and the Diamond X was a sort of fort."

He turned over the will, continued in a strained voice. "Then I found out the first

night I was home that it ain't—that one of the three kids I raised wants me out of the way as bad as Tilbury—maybe has throwed in with him. You see, Miss, I didn't just fall down them stairs. I didn't even trip over the chair that'd been planted in my way. I was movin' slow and careful in the dark, and felt it. I'd have put it aside, only somebody that must of been hid beside the grandfather clock jumped out and give me a shove!"

UNBREATHING, Adele stared at him. No wonder Marian had been so terror-stricken. Under the circumstances, wasn't she the most logical suspect? The remarkable thing was that she'd finally mustered sufficient courage to confide in Lee, for what chance would the word of either have against that of the man who stood strong and secure in the Old Man's favor?

Of a sudden Adele felt anger skim through her veins, a hot, indignant rage that Mark should be so successful in his treachery, and Dan Whipple so determinedly self-centered and blind.

"I suppose it's never once occurred to you that it's all your own fault?" she cried passionately. "Can't you see that if you'd made Mark stand on his own feet, win or lose, and hadn't tried to take over Marian's right to pick her own husband, you wouldn't be in this horrible situation?"

Flashing-eyed, she waited for his wrath to strike back, ready and willing to continue the battle.

To her amazement, he merely bowed his head. "I've been a damned old fool," he admited lowly. "I know that now. But the damage has been done, so all I care about now is straightening it out. That's why I had Yu San give out that I was hurt worse'n I was, so's I could have time to figure out which one is guilty."

"Then you don't suspect Marian?"

"That shove was too powerful for her," came the Old Man's answer. "It had a man's strength behind it. Of course, she could of maybe helped Tilbury slip into the honse. But then again I blowed off to Mark about leavin' everything to the State, and he prob'ly told Lee. The slick way Lee tracked me down when I was kidnapped kind of give me a turn, too. I wondered at the time if he. . . ."

"Lee's no murderer!" interrupted Adele fiercely. "He's loyal and brave and fine!" She broke off, face flaming.

Narrowly the Old Man surveyed her. "So you've fell for that young hellion, eh?" he soliloquized. "And you like Marian, it seems. So that means you're ready to plaster the blame on Mark!"

Doggedly Adele held back a torrent of words. "I've not met him yet," she said, and took refuge in relating the details of her arrival, omitting only any reference to Bowden.

"So it turned out to be a tough trip after all," observed the ranchman. "Reckon I'm sorry, Miss, sorrier because your feelin's have got mixed up in it, too. But I've got to learn who the guilty party is out of fairness to the other two. If he ain't mixed up with Tilbury, reckon I can overlook that shove since I prob'ly drove him to it by crowdin' him too much ever since he come here to live. But if there turns out to be a connection between it and the stage holdup and those two other attempts to rub me out. . . ."

The flinty look in his eyes promised little mercy for the malefactor.

He went on abruptly, "I'm goin' to burn this new will, Miss. It don't mean a damn thing now. I'm through tryin' to force Marian into anything. All I won't stand for is her marryin' Tilbury—not because of my trouble with him so much as because it's money he wants more'n her. Maybe I'll have to even make my old will over some, but in case I don't have to I'm goin' to get it out tomorrow and add a—a. . . . What would you call it? You're a lawyer's daughter."

"Codicil?" suggested Adele.

"That's it. A codicil to the effect of what I just said, and I'm also goin' to add a bequest for you in payment of what you've done."

"But I don't want any payment!" burst out Adele. "I wouldn't accept one!"

"I'll leave it anyway!" stated the Old Man flatly. "I pay my debts, both ways!"

THROUGH a sleepless night that last phrase tormented Adele. Suppose Mark actually succeeded in laying the blame on Lee, despite Marian's testimony? How far would Dan Whipple go in exacting justice where one of his own blood was concerned? She dropped off at last, unaware that the answer to that question was soon to be provided.

"Dad wants to see us while Yu San gets breakfast," announced Marian, while Adele dressed next morning in borrowed garments. "I don't know why, but he wants to see Lee

and Mark, too. I knocked on their doors but neither answered. I guess they're both out already."

Adele's first apprehension that the Old Man was about to force a showdown, changed swiftly to genuine alarm. Lee had gone out last night on the trail of Mark. If neither had come home at all. . . .

"Let's see if their beds were slept in," she said as they stepped in the hall. "Marian, I'm afraid—"

She never finished the sentence. From the kitchen downstairs there came a sudden racket as of scattering pots and pans, followed by a high, thin wail that ended abruptly. Frozen in their tracks, the eyes of the two girls met.

"Yu San!" whispered Marian.

Adele ceased to breathe at the sound of an opening door and the clump of booted feet advancing upon the living room. An icy hand gripped her heart as three men moved into sight, the hook-nosed gunman, Bowden, and another she knew to be Mark. Each held a six-shooter in readiness. For a moment they paused, gazing up at the girls. Then slowly, deliberately, they started up the stairs.

"Mark!" Marian's voice was almost a scream. "What did you do to Yu San? What do you want?"

"Nothin', to your first question. He got in Spade's way, not mine." Mark continued to come on, step by step. "As for your second—your friend there can answer it."

Halfway up the stairs he halted, holding back his companions with an outspread arm. "How about that, Miss Adele Barrett?" he drawled. "Have you given it to the Old Man yet? If not, do you give it to us—or do we take it?"

Valiantly Adele threw off her chill lethargy. "Neither one is necessary now," she said earnestly. "He said he'd burn it himself."

A hoot of laughter whitenend her face, drove home the futility of attempting to reason with or placate these men. They had come too far to be moved by anything she could say. They were playing their last desperate card, and it was one that called for the leaving of no witnesses behind. She guessed that the figure lying in the kitchen would never move again. She wondered suddenly, frantically, what had happened to Lee.

"If I give it to you, you won't—won't—" Stalling for time, she permitted her hand to creep significantly to her bosom.

"Hurt you? Of course not!" His tone was reassuring, but she knew by the veiled eagerness in his eyes that he lied. He would wait only until he saw the paper, knew for a certainty that she had it still in her possession, then the gun in his hand would spit death.

PRETENDING to fumble at the fastenings of her gown, her mind searched frantically for some lead through which to gain that other information for which her heart clamored. Unwittingly Marian helped her out.

"You're mad, Mark!" she gasped. "You wouldn't dare shoot—harm us! Someone would hear—the boys—or Lee!"

"Don't fool yourself!" he retorted. "I came in first, and sent every puncher off on a job. And as for Lee, ask Spade!" A jerk of thumb indicated the hook-nosed man.

Stark horror washed over Adele. "You mean—he's dead?"

She heard Marian's whimper. Then, as though from a distance, came Spade's laconic answer. "Gents who get a foot hung in a stirrup generally winds up that-a-way!"

Blackness swirled before Adele's eyes. She forgot the game of deception she had started, forgot even the danger in which they stood. For a brief flash she stood again in a man's arms and heard his voice. "No matter how this turns out, there'll be one bright spot—meetin' you!" She knew all her arguments had been false, that his words and kisses *had* been a welcome to love, and a farewell, too. He was gone.

In the anguish that swept her she lost all fear of the trio below. She knew nothing save a frenzy to strike back. A gun! There must be one in Dan Whipple's room!

Swift as the thought, she was whipping about, flying for the door behind her. A boom smote her ears. Something tugged at her hair. Then her hand was on the door knob, wrenching it open. Through a mist she saw the Old Man dragging himself out of bed.

Behind she heard a scream and the pounding of feet. Then a second clap of thunder rocked her head. Flame pierced her body, dragging her down. Yet still she continued to move on hands and knees, slowly, ponderously, through a world shot with red lights and filled with the hideous din of a battlefield.

She had no recollection of how it faded and silence closed about her.

WHEN she opened her eyes again, moments later it seemed, he was still the only person in sight. Oddly, however, he was fully dressed now, without even a bandage on his head. Odder still, he was sitting on a chair, watching her with a glad, hopeful look on his face, while she seemed to be flat in bed, utterly drained of vitality.

Her hands on the blanket covering were white and thin. As she surveyed them curiously, the Old Man spoke in an obvious attempt at lightness. "You," he said, "ought to know all about playin' a harp. You come so close to them pearly gates!"

She looked at him, and remembered. "Lee!" she whispered, and then there were tears slipping down her cheeks.

"Here!" remonstrated the Old Man in alarm. "None o' that, young lady! You mustn't—I—you—Oh, dang it all! Lee!" he roared.

Running footsteps sounded in the hall. The door burst open. "Uncle Dan! She's not—not—" The voice broke as the speaker approached the bed—someone tall and wonderfully blue-eyed, inexpressibly dear.

Adele did not notice Dan Whipple leave the room. "They told me you—a stirrup!" she faltered, after Lee's arms and lips had convinced her he was real.

"Spade only wounded me," he explained, stroking her hair. "And my foot didn't go clear through the stirrup because it jerked free in a couple of jumps. When I come to, I was only a little way from the road. Since Bobcat Canyon was closest, I went there for another horse. Besides, I knew Gene would want to be in on the showdown.

"Well, I wasn't in shape to move fast, so it was daylight before I got there. Nobody was home, but the kitchen was wrecked like there'd been a fight in it. Afterwards I learned Gene's punchers had found it like that when they came to see why he didn't holler breakfast and had gone out to hunt for him. Then I helped myself to a horse and hit for home.

"Mark's bay and the other two broncs in the yard warned me to slip up easy. I found Gene all tied up. They'd fetched him along, aimin' to polish him off last and make him out the killer. Well, it took only a minute to turn him loose and find an extra gun in the bunkhouse. We were in time to take care of Bowden and Spade when the fireworks started.

"Bowden will live to hang. He spilled everything, even how he'd been usin' Mark for a cat's paw. It wasn't only the new will he wanted but the old one, too—figured they'd be hid in the same place. Once they were both destroyed, he'd have set Spade on Mark, then drawed up a new one altogether namin' himself the final heir instead of the State!"

"And he'd have gotten away with it, too!" exclaimed Adele. "Mr. Whipple said Bowden could almost fool him with a forged signature of his name, that they'd even had a falling out over it."

Lee nodded. "That was something Mark never learned." His eyes met hers. "Mark shot at you twice—hit you once. Then he ran up the stairs to finish the job. But the Old Man had got hold of a rifle by that time, and just as he leveled his gun at you the third time. . . ."

"The Old Man himself killed Mark?" Adele's eyes went wide with horror and disbelief.

"Like he'd stomp out a rattlesnake!" affirmed Lee soberly. "And whatever he feels about it is locked inside. He'll never show it. He's gone the whole way to square himself, too. Marian and Gene are walkin' on air, plannin' their weddin'. There's only one thing the Old Man asks—that they wait until you're well, providin'—" his hand tightened about hers—"providin' you'll agree to marry me the same day! Will you, darlin'?"

That final word, the pleading in his eyes, brought the vitality Adele had thought drained away sweeping back in a glorious rush. "How could I say no?" she whispered joyously. "Especially to you!"

March 11unth. Sundy--

Quote:

When Japan Generils git licked,
The cross-eyed, bucktooth lummicks,
'Tis said they take a golden sword
An' slash it through their stummicks.
Jap soda-jerkers serve these swords
To them upon a pilla
But old Mike Arthur he jist said:
"No thanks, I'll take Manila!"

Unquote. Being a pome wrote by me an' resited in school in honor of Generil Mike Arthur an' his Gee Eyes chousing them Japs an' recaptivating the Filapeens. I no sooner set down from resiting it but what ole Ellick Johnson jump up, saying yeah, but if not for the Navy an' U. S. of A. Marines, ole Mike Arthur an' his Gee Eyes would have bog down at the first crossing.

"Well, Mister Ellick Johnson, Esquire," I says, "I have whupped you out before an can do so again if required. But when you try to rouse a ruckus with me over who gits the most credit for jolting the Japs, you have sure hung your boot in the wrong stirrup an' might as well joggle it aloose. In facks I have wrote a pome on the subjict, an' will hereby resite same if Teacher give permission."

But not. Her saying: "My goodniss, Mody Hunter, don't you realize there are other things people might be intristed in besides resiting your own poetry?"

"You mean jist the feminine sex or also us men?" I inquire.

"Can't you think of anything that might be of intrist to both?" she ask me.

He saying sure, bronc-riding for the men an' love affares for the women. Her saying, well, this being a school, sippose we compromise on arithmatic for both?

More of a bust for me to mention love affares in her presence anyways. On account of ole Bee-Fight McBride. Him being kinder of a wildcat young cowpuncher that used to spark her over on the Juntita severil years ago before she got to be a Teacher.

Home to His Saddle

By S. Omar Barker

From the Direy of Mister Mody Hunter. Age—Who Gives a Dam Anyways. Perfession — Bronc - Peeler an' Sometimes the Poetry.

One reason he has not been sparking her any more lately, well, he was one of Colonel Sage's Gee Eyes in the 200th Ack-Ack Artillery on a place called Bataan over in the Filapeens Islands. They do not know if killed or took prizner or what. Ixcept it was unconformed reports that he was shot through the neck whilst holding off a thousand YBs (short for you know what) so the rest of his company could git acrost the Pampanga River. Well, you know the only way to kill a cowboy is chop off his head an' hide it from him. So personaly I do not figger jist a bullet or two through the neck would slow down ole Bee-Fight very much. His being called "Bee-Fight" because he jist loved to poke wasps nests with a stick whenever it was somebody around on a skittery horse, or a few girls taking a Sunday P. M. walk, or an open air preaching, so he could enjoy the ixcitement.

Another whooper he pulled, it was a dance at the Juntita school house, Miss Amy Davison with her goldin hare fresh curled an' a new pink dress. For a while ole Bee-Fight swang her around every dance, sometimes a little extry hug an' bat his eyes at her like he thought she was the sugar on his doe-nut. According to the rumors, me not being there at the time, it is said her an' ole Bee-Fight was fixing to take a little pasear outside to tally the stars, ixcept Amy's ma cut them back into the mane herd.

So after whiles ole Bee-Fight went out by hisself an' everbody was jist hoopin' it up in an ole-fashion square dance when all of a sudden the electrified lights went out. No sooner everything dark when somebody throwed a bucketful of black walnuts all over the dance floor an' hollered fire.

Some of the women let out a squall an' run to the clokeroom after their babies, some of the men start running out to the well to fetch water to put the fire out, an' ever time somebody step on one of those walnuts, down he went or she. A very good ixcitement. I jist wisht I had of been there is all.

No sooner the lights on but what they fine out it was jist a joke, some of them laffing, but some got mad, including Amy Davison's pa. Him claiming if Bee-Fight ever come around his daughter again he would take a shotgun to him. Being the very next day that ole Bee-Fight went an' joint Col. Sage's Rejiment of the National Guards.

Amy Davison is sippose to have got some letters from him whilst in training at Ft. Bliss an' a couple more after they shipped the 200th to the Filapeens. If they was love letters or not, that is her secrit.

But after the Battle of Bataan it is no more word from him to anybody. Jist one more ole American cowpuncher that the Japs was too many for.

Me being a-skeered to ask her myownself, I got Billy Jean Shuttleworth (a certin yallerhare girl her father razes hawgs that I am sippose to be sweet on) to ask the Teacher about ole Bee-Fight's folks. Me never having heard of any McBrides over on the Juntita. Well, the Teacher did not want to talk about him very much, but as far as she knowed he was jist a mavrick, no kinfolks ixcept one Ole Made aunt name Izzabel down around Silver City.

Being jist a breef histry of Bee-Fight McBride, because ever since ole Generil Mike Arthur got back to the Filapeens an' begun liberating the prizners, everybody all over New Mexico can't hardly wait for the newspapers to fine out who has been turned a-loose next.

Even if he did enlist from over on the Juntita instid of here, we got a clame ole Bee-Fight. Purt near everbody here knowed him, what a wild young hoopit he was sipposed to be. Also on account of the Davisons moving here when Amy taken the teacher job. Jist ole Man Davison and Wife, her being their only daughter. Ixcept nobody seem to know for sure if she is the gal ole Bee-Fight left behine him or not. But probly.

MARCH 5th etc. Mondy-Tuesdy-Wensdy—Purt near ever day it is names in the newspapers or on the radio of more American prizzners libberated from the Japs, but still no reports on ole Bee-Fight McBride.

Being school for us older boys just mornings, us working different places in the PMs on account of the Man Power Shortage. Me helping ole Gumbo Shuttleworth build some more hawg pens to raze more hawgs to make more grease to fry more Japs an' Germins in. A bronc-peeler by perfession & cowboy, I would not be caught dead working on a hawg ranch if it was not the war going on. Not even for the doe-nuts. Her making them better than anybody I know of. Billy Jean, I mean, ole Gumbo's Fare-Hared Daughter.

March 8th. Thursdy—Jist hammering on the hawg pens this PM when a stranger ride by an' stopped to look at my horse. Being a buckskin dun pony with black markings that the Mexkins call a *bayo coyote* an' my favrite expert roping pony, his name is Bataan in honor of the heros. Not only plenty of style an' an easy travler, but also plenty of what is knowed in polite society as G-U-T-S, an' smart as a range-raised wolf. So I jist went out to see what the stranger had to say about him. Being kinder of a middle-aged man about 30, not ixackly look like a cowboy but not ixackly like a greenhorn either.

Me saying, "Well, hi yuh, dude! I see you lookin' at my pony."

"Roger," he says. "How much you want for him?"

Me saying: "Well, how much you offer?"

"If he's as good as he looks," he says, "I'll give you $200."

"Make it two milyun," I says, "an' the anser is jist the same. No sellum. Anyways what are you doing pasearing around buying horses instid of in the Army?"

Proving not all jackasses got big ears, because jist then I notiss him wearing an Honorable Discharge button on his shirt, also the Purple Heart ribbon an' some others. Me saying gee willikins an' offert to let him kick the seats of my pants for blatting out of turn.

"Forget it, kid," he says, an' start to ride away. Being jist then Billy Jean open the kitchen door so I ketch a whiff. No sooner smelt them but what I ask this stranger what about coming inside an' have a doe-nut on me. Him coming an' the Teacher was there. Dammiff he did not take a shine to her right away. It seems his name is Major Leland Gifford of Denver an' has jist bought the UF Connected Ranch over on the Juntita. Being the same outfit Bee-Fight McBride used to ride for, ixcept this feller owns the whole works instid. Howcome him to buy a ranch, he clames he was jist flying over the Alpis Mts. one day to throw a few bomms on them Krauts when all of a sudden he taken the notion to buy a ranch if he ever come home alive, an' never ride anything higher than a horse again as long as he live.

Me asking him how he like ranching by now. Him admitting he likes it fine ixcept maybe a little lonesome sometimes. An' kept looking at Amy Davison. Well, I was purt near a notion to warn him about her an ole Bee-Fight jist in case he is gitting any romantical ideas. But not.

MARCH 9nth. Fridy—Dammiff he did not come by the school house (ole Giff, the ex-Major) today. He clamed he come by to see if I change my mind about selling him ole Bataan, but I notiss he talk right smart to the Teacher too, enduring recess.

It has kinder got me worried. About selling him Bataan, I mean. Ole Spinnle Shanks remind me of a pome I wrote last winter, quote:

"When the soldiers come home from the battles,
To the land of the ranches an' cattles,
Out here in the West they can have jist the best
Of 'most anything that they want."

"Well, ole Giff is a soldier," says Spinnle, "so if he wants ole Bataan you got to sell him to him. An' besides, $250 is a hellova lot of money!"

"Ole Bataan is a hellova lot of horse, too," I says. "Besides, ole Giff has got plenty of good horses that come with the ranch."

"I wonder if they still got that bloom-tale buckskin ole Bee-Fight McBride yoost to rope calves on in the rodeos?" says Spinnle, pertending he can remember that far back.

"I heard they sold him to a rodeo hand name

Skipworth," says Mr. Hunter (my pop). "He'd be too old to be any good now. Five years is a long time in a horse's life."

Me saying I bet it seem even longer than that to ole Bee-Fight, speshly if he come back ixpecting to ride his favrite horse an' fine him gone. So then I ask Pop what about me selling Bataan to ole Giff.

"He's your horse, Mody," says Pop. "What you do with him is strickly up to you."

Proving that if you are one of ole Man Hunter's boys, either you skin your own wolf or he don't git skun.

March 10nth & 11vnuth. Saterdy & Sundy—Aimed to git together with ole Jug Milligan an' Spinnle Shanks an' Toots Tapply an' top off a rough colt or two Sat. afternoon. Being the Knit Knot Knag Klub meeting at our house to fold bandiges an so forth, so thought some of the girls & women might like to come out an' watch us. But not. Being a job of cow work offert us instid by Major Leland Gifford (ole Giff). It seems he has been buying up some winter-shrunk cattle around the valley on account he clames he's got plenty feed to carry them through to grass, an' see what he can make on them, jist for practiss. He ask Pop where can he hire a couple cowboys to gather the bunch an' start them over towards the Juntita.

"Hellza-pea-patch," says my pop. "Mody an' them burr-taled buttons he buckeroos around with will shove them over the hill for you and it won't cost you a damn cent."

So we done so. Me siggesting to Billy Jean if her an' the Teacher like to go along jist for the ride an' promuss to keep out of the way, I will let her ride ole Bataan part of the way back. That's the trouble with the women, the Teacher says she cannot go on account of the Knit Knot Knag Klub, but Billy Jean offert to go along anyways jist for the chance to ride ole Bataan. Ixcept when I told her it was the Teacher I offert to ride him, not her, dammiff she didn't git mad an' ball me out for all she cost.

PROVING I rather not have no women along when driving the cattle anyways. A couple of the women wanted to git Major Gifford to come make a speech to the Knit Knot Knag Klub on the subjict of, "How Should We Treat the Boys When They Come Home?"

Him dodging out of it by sending word he has got these cows to move as soon as he can.

"Goddlemighty," he says to Pop, out at the corrals, "whoever give these dames the idea that they got to have somebody tell them how to treat their own husbands, sons an' sweethearts?"

"Funny, ain't it?" shrugs Pop. "You a married man, Giff?"

Him saying: "No, but I'm not speshly opposed to it. Why?"

"Oh, nothing," says Pop with a sigh. "Only I jist happen to be on the school board an' it's he-ll the way we lose teachers around here."

Me saying, "Well, I bet we do not lose this one, anyways not until it is some news of what happen to ole Bee-Fight, whether he is still alive or not."

"Never you mind, Mody," says Pop, more of a frown. "Just buckle down your tree an' straddle up. There's slow cattle to move an' you ain't got all day."

Being the end of the discussion.

Am writing this Sundy nite, jist back from the cow drive. A couple of UF hands name ole Skageroo McYoon an' Frosty White met us about halfways to take the cattle offen our hands. So I jist ask them confidential how bad off the UF Connected is for good horses. Them saying he-ll, they got more top saddle broncs than they know what to do with. So to H-E-Double-Q with letting ole Giff have Bataan, even if he is a return soldier.

I stop by the hawg ranch this evening, jist in case it is any leftover doe-nuts they don't want to git stale. Billy Jean pertending she would not even speak to me, much less doe-nuts, on account of her not gitting to ride Bataan. More of a sipprize that it is ole Giff there also an' the Teacher. Him taking her home in his Bewick an' jist happen to stop by, I sippose.

Me not being any hand to horn into anybody else's bizniss unless invited, so I ask the Teacher if she will jist step out on the porch a minute where I can speak to her private on the subjict of arithmatic an' stuff.

Me saying: "Well, Miss Amy, what about it?"

Her saying what about what, the arithmatic? Me saying: "No mam, I mean what about ole Giff? Personly I got nothing aginst him, but if you rather he wouldn't try to spark you, on account of being true to Bee-Fight McBride, I will be glad to tell him the facks an' run him off."

Gee whillikins I never see a girl rare up an' git so mad all of a sudden.

"Mody," she says, "anything I want Major Gifford told, I will tell him myself. If you want to grow up to be as much of a perfict gentlemun as he is, you'd better start learning to keep your little round nose out of other people's affares!"

"Well, ole Bee-Fight was a bronc-fighter an' us bronco men got to hang together," I says. "Anyways my nose is not little an' round, being more of medium size an' pare-shaped."

Besides the New Mexico weather, it is nothing can change their tune as quick as a woman.

"Oh, Mody," she sound like purt near to cry an' put her arm around my shoulder ixcept I elooded her, "do you really think there is a chance that he's still alive?"

Me saying: "Well, at the rate ole Gen. Mike Arthur is cleaning up the Filapeens, I ixpect we will soon fine out, anyways."

MARCH 12vth. Mondy —Nothing of importunce. Jist wrote another pome is all, in favor of a certain brand. Quote:

"There is brands that's mostly wore by cattle,
There is also brands upon a hoss,
But the favrite brand of soldiers that git hurt in battle,
Is the brand called the ole Red Cross."

March 13teenth. Tuesday—Being right in the big middle of the arithmatic lessun this morning when yonder come ole Gumbo Shuttleworth galloping up bareback on a work horse. He bust right in, stomp up to the front an' spread a newspaper on the Teacher's desk.

"I fetched it right away as soon as I seen it," he pants.

Me leaving my arithmatic problim that I could not git the right anser to on the blackborde an' sidled over to the Teacher's desk jist in time to help ole Gumbo ketch her from purt near fainting. For jist a minute she kinder set down, reading the paper, then stood up an tears in her eyes in spite of herself.

"Children," she announce, "school is dismissed for today."

Being a heck of a time to turn out school, because while my back turned some had fixt my arithmatic problim with the right answer. Probly Billy Jean, I sippose. But the Teacher never even notiss I got it right for once.

Sevril of us hung around anyways to read the paper. Being a new list of prizners libberated in the Filapeens an' coming home via San Francisco. In amongst them it says, "Sargint Oren McBride, former cowboy and nefew of Miss Izzabel McBride of Silver City, N. Mex., when asked what he looked forward to the most upon his return to the U. S. of A. grinned and said he was going to unsack his saddle, throw it on his old buckskin pony and visit with the jackrabbits till he plumb forgot there was ever such a varmint as a Jap in the world."

Proving he did not even mention the gal he left behind him. Proving that maybe he fergot all about Miss Amy.

Gee willikins. Maybe he will not even come here to the valley at all an I will not git to show off Bataan in a perade of welcome after all.

Mrch. 16teenth. Fridy—More of a sipprize when it was school all week jist as if nothing happened. Miss Amy got more of a cheerful look to her eyes, but jumpy as a skeert rabbit. I don't know if she is nerviss for fears ole Bee-Fight won't come here lookin' for her or for fears he will. Proving you never know about women. Ixcept by expeerience, I sippose.

Ever since the word got around that Sargt. Oren McBride (ole Bee-Fight) is a freed prizner, it has been a big debate all over the valley what kind of welcome home we ought to throw to celebrate his honor. Some favors a picnic, some a dress-up recepshun with speeches, some a big perade an' rodeo, some jist a dance an' Spinnle Shanks' ma siggest a prayer meetin'.

"Well," says ole Spinnle, "I see Ole Man Davison oilering up his shotgun an' fitting a new stock in it the other day, so maybe whatever we hold it will turn out to be a foot race. You remember what he said about takin' a shotgun to him if ole Bee-Fight ever showed up again around his daughter."

"Jist let him try it," I says. "I will brade his ole whiskers into a hare rope an' hobbel him with it."

Personly I got no objections to the prayer meetin' idea if helt ahorseback. After all my pony is the only person around here officially named for the battle of Bataan, so he sure ought to be rode in the welcome, jist for the honor of it.

MRCH. 17teenth. Saterdy—Jist mostly riding around the valley trying to disside what kind of a whooperuckus we are going to throw for ole Bee-Fight. But not a very good success. Everybody wants to welcome him, but diffrint ideas how to do it. Ixcept Miss Amy Davison. When I ask her, all she said was "Goodniss, what makes you think he will come here anyways? Don't you sippose he will go strate to see his Aunt Izzabel at Silver City?"

"Well, there is one way to fine out," I says. "Where is his saddle?"

Her saying, "What's that got to do with it?"

Me saying, "Well, you take a cowboy that has been away an' he will head strate for his saddle every time. Only I don't know where he left it."

"He left it at the UF Connected," she says. "But I don't think it's there now."

"Why not?" I inquire.

"I jist cannot imagine," she says, more of a snicker than I heard out of her for a long time.

"Well, anyways," I says, "I am going to ride over there tomorrow an' fine out."

Being also a dibate of the subjict here at home this evening. Pop says: "Folks are sure funny. Back before Pearl Harbor you could hear tongues clackin' all over the valley what a disgraceful behavin' young wilecat young McBride was, an' what a shame if a nice gal like Amy Davison should marry him, but now even Ole Lady Shanks thinks he's a lily-white hero!"

"Shame on you!" says Mom. "Maybe he isn't lily-white, but he *is* a hero. An' if you ask me, if it wasn't for the wilecat blood in a heap of young wildies like Oren McBride, the Japs an' Germins would long since have took us all."

"Now you're talkin', Ole Woman!" says Pop, he give her a poke in the ribs. "But if I recollect aright, you sung a diffrint tune that night you fell an' bust your corsit over them walnuts he throwed in on the floor over at that Juntita dance!"

Proving they never had told me before about Mom busting her corsit.

"Just the same," she says, "if he comes back to this part of the country I think we ought to give him a rousing welcome to show him we appreciate what he's been through an' at the same time not embarriss him. I wisht Walt was here. He'd know what to do."

Walt being my ole bronc-fighting brother that is now a Captin of the Artillery hisownself over in the Filapeens. Me saying, "Well, gee willikins, as long as ole Walt ain't around how about leaving it to a certin brother of his name Mody?"

"Jist what I was afrade of," says Pop. "By the way, this Major Gifford is a return soldier—maybe he could give you some advice about what's proper."

Me saying all right, I will jist ride over an' ask him.

MRCH. 18teenth. Sundy Nite—Taken an all-day pasear over to the UF Connected. A very good success. Found out from ole Skageroo McYoon who's keeping Bee-Fight's saddle for him, jist as I sispected. Also found out Major Gifford (ole Giff) was aiming to throw a barbecue some time soon anyways, so why not bust two thumbs with one hammer an' make it a Welcome Home Barbecue for a Hero of the Filapeens?

"Easy on that hero stuff, Mody," he says. "Most of these boys jist figger they had a dirty job to do an' done it. But since Sargint McBride was riding for the UF when he joined up, maybe this would seem more like home to him than anywheres else. Of course his old job is waiting for him, too, if he wants it. And I don't see where there'd be any harm if a bunch of the ranch folks he used to know jist happen to be gathered to gnaw a barbecued bone or two about the time he arrives, do you?"

Me saying nossir, ixcept sippose he leaks out for Silver City to see his Aunt Izzabel instid?

Him saying, "Well, maybe we better hire a few bandits to kidnap Aunt Izzabel an' have her here, too."

Me saying, "Well, what about the red points for the barbecue meat?"

Him saying, "Well, maybe we can skeer up a stray goat or two that ain't on the list."

Me saying, "Well, what about letting him know he is ixpected?"

Him saying, he will tend to that by long distance to Frisco. Me saying better tell Bee-Fight he'll haff to come here to git his saddle, jist for bait. An' what about me leading the perade on ole Bataan?

"We'll breef everbody on all the detales," he says.

"An' what about Miss Amy Davison?" I inquire.

"Well, what about her?" he says. "Ixcept

that she's a lovely girl and your nose is too long?"

Me saying, "Well, nothing, ixcept ole Man Davison been polishing up his shotgun an' Amy is the one that's got his saddle."

"Won't she be sipprized," he shrugs, "if Sargint McBride arrives with a Filapeena bride an' she has to marry me after all—or be an ole made?"

Well, gee willikins, I never even thought of that.

Mrch. 22cund. Thursday—Too bizzy to write in the tally book. Manely jist whoopering around making the arrangemints. Can't fine out if Miss Amy Davison has got word from him herownself or not. Jist none of my dam bizniss, I sippose. According to Billy Jean.

Mrch. 23urd. Fridy—I be dammiff ole Giff ain't the Main High Horny Tode when it comes to making the arrangemints. Knows jist where to telephone an' all the red tape so ole Bee-Fight will git here jist at the right time. Also got the money to git the job done. Like fetching Aunt Izzabel, etc. He would be a wunnerful rich husbind for a schoolmarm. Ixcept purty old—already past 30. An' not a bronc-pealer, either, like ole Bee-Fight.

Mrch. 24th. Saterdy—Everything fixt. I got ole Bataan curried out till he shine like a nester woman's nose on washday. Everbody going, an' more ixcitement than a monkey on a mule. Jist wate till tomorrow.

Mrch. 25fth. Sundy Nite—Midnight an' jist got home from the Barbecue so will make a breef report of the facks. I sippose the Teacher knows what she is doing. Pop says he would sure hate to be a girl an' haff to disside who to marry. Claiming personly he jist married the first girl he found would have him.

WELL, jist so he would not git sispicious an' balk on us, ole Giff sent ole Skageroo McYoon in the Bewick to meet Bee-Fight at the train, him being the mane one who yoost to know him.

But on the way back, at the Juntita Forks, they ran into me an' severil ole cowhands we picked for the guards of honor, jist waiting with the horses all saddled, an' we flagged them down.

Being none other than ole Bee-Fight McBride in the Bewick with ole Skageroo, even more hansome than ixpected in his uniform ixcept it is a big scar on his neck an' face. Also looks purty skinny where the dam Japs had starved him.

"Hey, what makes with the road block?" ask ole Bee-Fight, the same ole grin I sippose. Ixcept the way he looked at them ole cowponies purt near reminded me of a stray pup that jist found somebody he ain't afrade will kick him.

Being handshakes all around, no matter if they knowed him before or not. Then ole Frosty White cleared his throte.

"The boys been bettin' you've plumb forgot how to straddle a hoss, Bee-Fight," he says. "So I told 'em let's meet him at the Forks and find out. Here's your ole boots an' hat. You want to hossback in over the Snake Elbow short cut, cowboy?"

Without saying nothing, first Bee-Fight put on the hat an' boots, then jist walked over to a hansome buckskin pony an' looked at the saddle.

"He-ll, that's my own ole hull!" he gulp. "An' what a pony! Purt near reminds me of ole Buck!"

"His name is Bataan," I says. "Climb on him, cowboy!"

Me riding a UF pony ole Giff loaned me, as we take out I see ole Bataan puttin' on his style an' Bee-Fight sure likin' him.

Purty soon we drop over into Snake Elbow Canyon. Lucky the wind was the other way or he might have smelt it an' got sispicious. Being all of a sudden we come around a crook in the draw an' there is a big bunch of people in the meadow, the smell of barbecue beef an' a flagpole an' somebody playing *Home on the Range* on a Victerola, an' here is ole Bee-Fight a straddle of ole Bataan, heading a perade in spite of hisself. For a minit I was afrade he would cut back on us. Instid he give a cowboy squall an' swang his hat an' pranced ole Bataan right on down the line, I never seen anybody perade a pony any purtier. Proving he is a very good sport. Ixcept I sispect he purt near liked it all right anyways.

Quick as the music stop, ole Man Hunter (my pop) stepped up on a big rock an' wave his hat.

"Shut up, everbody!" he shout. "I'm fixin' to make a speech—in jist three words: Welcome home, cowboy!"

Being a Pome of Welcome I could resite if invited. But not. Ole Bee-Fight jest wave his hat to the applause, kinder looking around, looking around, till Pop wave his arm, saying:

"They're right over there, Bee-Fight, waitin' for you!"

Being a grey hair lady in a wheel chair, name Aunt Izzabel of Silver City, an' Miss Amy Davison standing beside her. No sooner Bee-Fight recognize them but he jumped ole Bataan right over there an' swang off. First he give his Aunt Izzabel a hug an' purt near upset her wheel chair if ole Giff had not jumped over there to kitch it. Then Bee-Fight turned to the Teacher, an' jist stood there looking at her.

"Gee, Bee-Fight!" she says, jist to start the conversation, I sippose. "You haven't changed a bit!"

Him still jist standing there gazing at her an' swallering his cud. Being ole Giff that step up then an' tore the wagon sheet.

"You better grab her, Sargint," he grinned, "or somebody else will!"

BEE-FIGHT made a funny frog noise like he'd swallered his tongue, then turned right quick an' stepped aboard ole Bataan. More of a sipprize, instid of leaking out away from there, he whirlt ole Bataan around an' made a run an' ketch Miss Amy Davison up in his arms an' gallop off with her, plumb acrost the *vega* behine some junipers. Gee willikins, if not a well trained pony like ole Bataan, he would not have missed knocking over Aunt Izzabel's wheel chair by a inch. Proving it is still some of the same ole wilecat in him, anyways.

Everbody clap hands an' laffing. Then ole Giff an' his cowboys begun serving out the barbecue an' after whiles here come ole Bee-Fight, kinder lank an' lean with the sun jist glissening on his black hare, walking back across the *vega* leading ole Bataan with his hat on the saddle horn, an' Miss Amy Davison purty close beside him holding hands, not bashful of it or anything.

No sooner I step out to offer them some barbecue when he hand me ole Bataan's reins, kinder of a punch on the shoulder like ole Walt yoost to give me.

"Thanks for loanin' me your pony to ride, bronc-pealer," he grin. "He sure is a dandy!"

"If you like him you can have him," I says.

"Why, Mody!" intersclaims Miss Amy. "I thought Bataan wasn't wasn't for sale, not to anyone."

"He ain't," I says. "But I can make a presint of him to this ole buckaroo from Bataan in honors of Generil Mike Arthur an' the rest of them, can't I?"

Me handing him the reins. Being purt near a minit before he said anything. Then handed them back to me.

"You'll do to take along, bronc-pealer," he says. "But I can't take your pony along with me."

"Why an the he-ll not?" I says. "Ain't you forked enough to ride a good horse any more?"

"It ain't that," he says, kinder looking off up the draw. "I jist won't have no use for a horse. I'm goin' back to fight the Japs as soon as I can."

Her giving a little gasp an kinder drawed away from him.

"But Bee-Fight, honey! You've been through so much, an' I've waited so long for you to come home, an'—"

"There's other women waitin' for boys that ain't home yet," he bust in, an' I never hear a man speak so sober in my life. "I don't aim to run out on 'em—not as long as I'm able to fight. Pervided of course—" he give her arm a squeeze an' begun to grin an' bat his eyes—"pervided I can find somebody reliable to keep my saddle for me—again!"

For a minit it purt near look like she wasn't going to make it, then she give him the smile he was waiting for, no tears to speak of at all.

"How about letting your wife keep your saddle for you this time, cowboy?" she ask lookin' him in the eye.

A very good time for me to leak out away from there or else throw sand in my eyes so I won't watch him kiss her. Ixcept jist then yander come ole Man Davison with his shotgun. Too late to head him off and everything beginnin' to look black.

"Sargint McBride," he booms through them bristle-whiskers of his, "I once promised to take a shotgun to you if you ever come around my daughter again—an' I'm a man of my word. Will you kindly back off a little so I can *take* this one to you—as a present to hunt quail with when you git through with huntin' them Japs?"

Proving it is offen a happy end to everthing. Jist so it is not the wrong end of a shotgun!

PLUMB STUBBORN

By James W. Routh

CLAY kept thinking Kate was a stubborn wench, when all that was the matter was that her heart was hungry—and for him.

BILL MINARD had fenced the claim and built a small log house near the spring before he died, but it wasn't much of a place for a girl like Kate to make her home. The claim itself was well chosen as a piece of land, and the spring gave it value in that arid country, but the idea of a girl of nineteen settling down in such a lonely spot with a few head of cattle and a couple of horses for companions just didn't make sense.

"I won't let you do it," Clay Dimmit told Kate. "You belong here at the Diamond."

Clay had just turned twenty-two himself and for nearly a year, since the death of his own father, he'd owned the Diamond D of which Bill Minard had been foreman for many years. He was an upstanding man, was Clay; an inch over six feet in height, straight as a lodge-pole pine, wide across the shoulders and narrow through the hips. An unruly mop of straw-colored hair crowned his head, his eyes were clear blue like the Arizona sky, and his clean-cut features made him as handsome a man as a girl could desire. But the tone of his voice wasn't handsome at all.

"I belong," Kate said quietly "where I choose to be. Dad filed on that claim so that we'd have a home some day of our own. I'm not letting it go. And I'm not on your payroll, Clay, so don't try to give me orders!"

Clay's blue eyes blazed down at her and his lips pulled tight. There was a stubborn streak in Kate that didn't belong in a woman. Even as pretty a girl as she was, with her great dark eyes and her blue-black hair, should realize that a man's judgment was best. His mother had been sweet and lovely, too, but she'd never crossed his father in any particular. What the old man had said had been law to everyone at the Diamond. And now Clay stood in his father's shoes, and what he said was the law.

"You ain't on my payroll," he agreed, "but you've lived at the Diamond all your life, which makes me responsible for you now that Bill ain't here to ride herd on you no more. I won't have you livin' alone on that homestead claim. It ain't fit for a woman to live thataway. I'll buy your land an' you can bank the money."

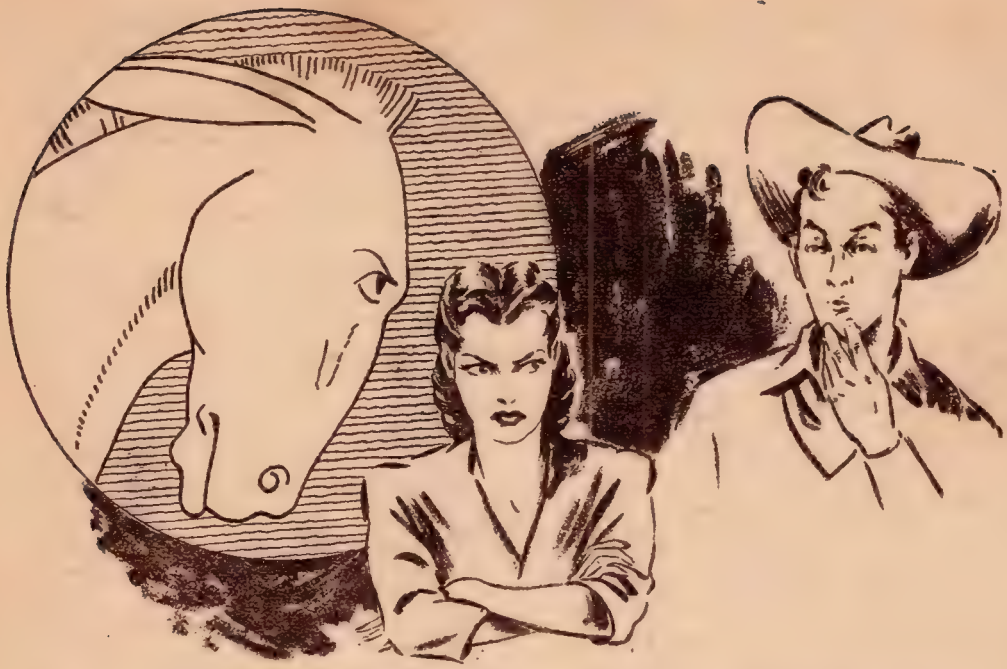
"You," said Kate, still quietly, "have nothing to say about what I do or where I go. And I don't intend to sell you my home."

"Your home!" snorted Clay. "This is your home. Has been since you was born." Then, seeing how defiantly she stared back at him and how lovely she was when she had her back up that way, he gave thought to an idea that he hadn't intended to mention just yet. "Mebbe," he said moodily, "you'd feel better about stayin' here if we got married. We'll ride into town tomorrow or next day an'—"

He never finished because Kate turned her back on him and walked out of the room. The look she gave him just before she turned was what really stopped him. Nobody had ever looked at him exactly that way before. It made his ears burn and left a gone feeling in his stomach.

"Pretty nigh made a fool of myself," he muttered as he stalked across the yard to the corral. "Huh! She knows plumb well I've been figgerin' to marry her. The old man an' Bill had it planned years ago. Whatever made her blow up thataway?"

Inwardly cussing the perverseness of womankind, he stepped into his saddle and rode out to visit a line camp. Time he got back he reckoned Kate would have cooled off. He'd put it up to her again then, maybe picking his words a little more carefully, although he'd be damned if he could understand why it should be necessary. They'd grown up together, hadn't they? She knew he'd never as much as looked at another girl. She knew it had been all set, before they were knee-high to a couple of horn toads, that they'd get married as soon as they grew up to the right age. Of course he hadn't gone moonin' around her like a sick calf, but what did she expect? He'd had a job on his hands since the old man died, and a bigger one now that Bill was gone.



"Anyhow," he told his horse, "what's the sense of a lot of mush? I'll make it plain to her this evenin'. Might even kiss her if it'll make her feel better about gettin' hitched."

He shook his head and did not understand at all why the thought of kissing Kate should be so disturbing. It increased the gone feeling in his stomach and made his ears burn more than ever. And the thought continued to haunt him all the rest of the day, making him both eager and reluctant to get home in the evening. When he did get back, however, Kate was gone.

"She packed up her duds an' pulled out around noon," said Beans Colter, the cook. "Allowed she was goin' to her claim. Said to tell you good-by."

"The hell she did!" growled Clay.

And then, with Beans and a couple of the cowboys who happened to be around staring at him, he stalked into the house. Until that night it had never occurred to him that the Diamond ranch house could be big and lonely.

For three days he resisted the impulse to ride out to the claim and see how Kate was getting along. During those three days he rehearsed the speeches he intended to deliver, pointing out her folly and some possible consequence of her headstrong course. She'd have sampled what it meant to live by herself in such a lonely spot, and she'd listen to him all right. She might even break down and cry. Then he could comfort her and take her home to the Diamond, and they could get married and he could stand between her and the rough world. He drew considerable satisfaction out of the picture he painted in his imagination.

Riding out that morning, Clay had to admit that Bill Minard had displayed excellent judgment in the selection of his homestead. He'd filed on a square mile of fine grassland which lay in a wide canyon between the Diamond and the JB. The spring, which had never run dry even in periods of protracted drouth, was near the north end of the canyon on high ground, and the flow ran across Minard's land in a small stream which emptied into a deep pool inside the Diamond fence, just beyond the point where the JB fence angled in. Pine forest cloaked the hillside behind the small log house, making as neat a setting as a man could wish for.

Clay opened a pole gate, closed it behind him, and rode along a trail where another rider had preceded him not long ago. He speculated upon the identity of that rider, and opined that it might have been Kate, returning from a trip to town. The only other probability was that John Blakeley might be calling on her. This brought a scowl to Clay's face. Several

years ago the owner of the JB had gone to law in an unsuccessful effort to establish a claim to the pool which the Diamond had fenced off. Failing in that, he'd made successive offers to Bill Minard for the portion of the claim which contained the source spring, but Bill had refused to sell. Blakeley was a pretty tough citizen. Not at all the kind of man who should be dropping in on Kate in this remote spot.

"Git along!" Clay muttered, nudging his horse to a faster gait, "If he's molestin' her I'll take him apart! Damn a woman that ain't got sense to know the risk she's-runnin'!"

Anger, evenly directed against Kate and Blakeley, built up in him as he loped along and came finally into view of the log house. And Blakeley was there, lending a hand to the girl who, clad in levis and work shirt, was repairing a break in the fence of a pole corral that enclosed her two horses.

"That does it," said Blakeley, as Clay pulled up. "Mornin', Dimmit."

"Thanks," smiled Kate, pushing her hair back from her flushed face. "Hello, Clay!"

She looked mighty sweet standing there, slim and tall against the background of pineclad hills, with the Arizona sun falling upon her warmly. Even when she was dressed like a man there wasn't a prettier girl in seven counties, but he liked her better in a woman's fixings. She didn't belong in a place like this, getting herself in a sweat over a man's job. He gave Blakeley a curt nod and scowled at the girl.

"Come to fetch you home," he said. "I'll send one of the hands to do your patchin' for you."

"Nice of you," said Kate. "But I am home, and I don't need any of your hands. Mr. Blakeley was nice enough to lend me a hand with this job."

Blakeley smiled. He was a big, dark-complected man with piercing black eyes and a closely clipped mustache. Clay thought of him as an old man, but he actually was still in his thirties, and he had a smooth way of talking that contrasted with the sharp practices he resorted to on occasion. His outfit was larger even than the Diamond, and he employed a salty crew of gun-toting cowboys, some of whom reputedly were wanted by the law in other localities.

The JB range ran down to the Mexican border, and Blakeley was said to hove connections below the Line which involved him in profitable but shady dealings. But nothing had ever been proved against him. Clay had never liked him, and Clay's father had been the leader of the older cowmen thereabouts who looked with suspicion upon the JB and its owner.

"Always glad to help a charming lady," he said with a little bow. "I'm sure we'll be good neighbors, Miss Minard. And now I'll be ridin'."

Stepping into his saddle he turned his big black horse, lifted his hat and rode away. Clay followed him with a scowling glance that turned finally upon Kate.

"What's that hombre doin' here?" he demanded.

"Lending me a hand with this job," Kate said quietly. "He saw smoke over here and came to see where it came from. It was very nice of him."

"Yeah," growled Clay. He eyed her suspiciously and added: "Could be he's still interested in your spring."

What he meant was that if Blakeley could get control of the spring, he could divert the flow and dry up the Diamond's pool. But Kate seemed to place another interpretation upon his statement. She gave him a withering look.

"Could be he's interested in me," she said. "He's an attractive man."

"He's an old man," Clay blurted, feeling as if the ground had been jerked from under his feet.

"Not so very," Kate denied, with a small mysterious smile. "About thirty-five, I should say. Not too old, but old enough to have learned how to—" She stooped to pick up a box of staples and did not finish.

The speeches Clay had rehearsed on the way over failed to fit this situation. Nothing he could think of seemed to fit it. What did Kate mean? Old enough to have learned what?

"Old enough," he growled "to've learned how to soft soap a silly gal! Huh! You shore need lookin' after, Kate. Time for you to quit this monkey-business. Git your duds an' we'll head for home."

The look she gave him now was not mysterious. It seemed to bore right through him.

"I am home. And if you came here to order me around like one of your cowhands, Clay Dimmit, you can fork that horse and clear out—and stay out!"

With her head in the air, she started past him, hammer in one hand, staples in the other, small feet stepping sharp and quick. She was for all the world like a filly on the prod, ready

to r'ar an' pitch at the touch of a hand or the swish of a rope. Clay knew about horses. He reached out, caught her arm, and whirled her around. He grabbed her hard and before he as much as thought he had kissed her hard. It was a sizzling kind of kiss that landed squarely on her lips and seemed to fuse the two of them together with its heat.

A feeling he had never before experienced swept over Clay. It tightened the grip of his arms about the girl, choked and maddened him.

"Kate!" he muttered. "Kate, I'm plumb loco."

The mutter freed her lips. He tried to recapture them, but found that he had an armful of lightning. She ripped herself out of his arms as if they were straw. She snatched up the box of staples and flung it at him. It struck him on the chest and showered him with staples. She snatched up the hammer and hauled back to let him have that, and to save his life he could not move a finger.

"Oh!" she gasped. "You—you—" And to complete his amazement, she dropped the hammer, turned and ran for the house as if something were after her. She ran into it and slammed the door and left him there, shaking in his boots and gaping after her.

"My God!" he muttered.

He shook his head and picked staples out of his shirt. He stared at the closed door, feeling as if he'd been run over by a stampede. Kate had never acted like that before. Always she'd been quiet and soft-spoken; stubborn, of course, but quiet even when she got her dander up. This was something he did not understand at all.

Here he'd again been about to tell her that he was in love with her and wanted her to come back home and marry him, but she'd blown up as if he'd insulted her. Yeah, that must have been it. He'd better try and square it somehow. Because, damn it all, he did love her! He'd been plumb dumb not to have known it long ago. But he knew now, and it looked very much as if he'd queered himself for keeps.

Slowly he walked over to the closed door. It stayed closed. It was a substantial door made of hewn planks. He stared at it and lifted his hand to knock, dropped it, lifted it again and did knock.

"Kate! Kate, honey, I want to—"

"Go away, Clay Dimmit!" she cried. "I've got a loaded shotgun. If you open that door—Oh, go away!"

It wasn't just the shotgun threat that stopped him. It was something in her voice, a kind of quavering determination. He had a sudden strong conviction that to try to open that door would be unhealthy for both of them.

"I'm goin'," he said. "But I'll be back after you've cooled off—to take you home. Reckon you've got it straight now. Reckon you know—uh—why I want you—uh—back—"

No sound came from the other side of the door. He waited until he was sure, then he mounted his horse and rode away, slowly.

All the rest of that day he went around in a sort of trance, so that the Diamond cowboys eyed him curiously and wondered what had got into him. It was rare indeed that Clay was uncertain about anything. Like his father, he was apt to make up his mind at the snap of a finger and act and get done with it. But in Kate he found a new kind of problem. Thought of her always at the Diamond where he could hold her in his arms whenever he chose, made his heart thump and caused his blood to run fast and hot. Thought of losing her forever filled him with sick despair. At one moment he was all for riding hell-for-leather back to the claim. At the next he was scared stiff at the thought of facing her again. And then he was scared all over again, but differently, at the thought of never seeing her again.

"What's botherin' you, fella?" Slim Laramie asked him that evening as they jogged homeward. "You've been actin' up all day like a bronc with a burr under its tail."

Laramie was a lanky Texan who had come to the Diamond a couple of years back and stayed. He'd become a special friend of Clay's, and now that Bill Minard was gone he'd moved into the foreman's job. But Clay couldn't bring himself to confide even in his friend. He rode along with only a grunt for an answer, and Laramie eyed him shrewdly and opined that a female-woman could sure play hell with a man's peace of mind.

"Once let one of 'em git the jump on you," he drawled, "and you're a goner. Man needs to watch his step an' keep the upper hand or he ain't got a chance."

"Sounds like you'd had a heap of experience," Clay said with heavy sarcasm.

"I've been around," said Laramie. And then, daring greatly, he mentioned what none of the other boys had dared to. "Your mistake was in lettin' Kate git away from the Diamond."

"Mighty smart, ain't you?" sneered Clay. "You know damn well she pulled her picket when nobody was around to stop her."

Laramie smoothed out a grin. "Thing to do now then is to git her back."

"Shore! Jest right out an' fetch her back, I suppose. Toss a loop over her head an' haul her back, mebbe. Yeah! An' her with a shotgun!" He stopped abruptly, his face burning.

Laramie was wise enough not to let on he'd noted the slip. He let a couple of minutes go past and then remarked that there were ways for a man to proceed under almost any set of circumstances. It was when a man quit that he let himself get licked. Likewise, he drawled, when a man stopped usin' his brains he might as well crawl under a tombstone.

"My brains is plumb atrophied," Clay said savagely. "If yours is better, git busy an' prove it."

"Keep your fur smooth," Laramie said calmly. "You got brains, only you ain't usin' 'em jest now. That claim is a mighty lonesome spot for a gal. Mebbe a good scare would sort of change her mind."

"I'd as soon figger on scarin' a she-grizzly," muttered Clay. "You don't know Kate the way I do. You try to scare her an' she'll fill you full of buckshot!"

But Laramie had planted the germ of an idea in his mind none the less. If he could hit upon some scheme by which to bring home to Kate the dangers of living alone that way, and at the same time convince her that Blakeley was a connivin' skunk, she'd be plumb glad to come home an' marry him. However, Kate wasn't a girl to be scared by any ordinary means. The job would have to be carefully planned and carried out or it would sure backfire. He shook his head and rubbed his chin and glared when Laramie chuckled.

"She's shore got the Injun sign on you, pardner," drawled the Texan. "Listen, if you could git her out of a jackpot which she couldn't nowise handle herself, mebbe she'd think better of you, huh?"

In view of what had happened that morning Clay had difficulty in imagining any situation which Kate could not handle competently, but he didn't say so.

"She couldn't think no worse," he growled. "Hell, she even allowed that Blakeley's a better man than me!"

This wasn't exactly true, of course. She'd said that Blakeley was an attractive man, that he was interested in her, and that he knew how to make up to a woman. The inference was that Clay Dimmit was none of these things.

"What about Blakeley?" Laramie asked. "Didn't know she'd ever met that slick buzzard."

Clay had to come clean then as to how he'd found Blakeley helping Kate to fix her corral fence. And it was apparent that Laramie liked the notion no better than he did.

"There's one *malo* hombre if I've every saw one," stated the Texan with emphasis. "Miss Kate better have no truck with him."

Clay pounded his saddle horn with his fist. "I know. But try an' make her see it!"

"I got some dope on three of them JB gunhands," Laramie continued. "Ace Tucker an' Harp Bodin, who's ramroddin' the outfit now, belonged to the Del Rio gang back in Texas. Wet cattle wasn't all they run across the Border. Huh! Where'd Miss Kate be if that cuss took a notion to grab that spring he'd wanted so long? Time anybody found out about it, he could have her where she'd never be found!" He shook his head and there was no smile in the look he gave Clay, and none in Clay's answering look.

Laramie's ideas were so nearly in line with Clay's as a matter of fact that he gave no further consideration to the possibility of scaring Kate. Soon after breakfast the next morning, however, he headed for the homestead, determined to have a straight talk with the girl. Somehow he'd make her listen and understand the risks she ran.

When he rode up to the little log house Kate came to the door. She didn't smile and she didn't look like a girl who would listen to reason.

"If you've come to argue with me again," she said before he could get a word in, "you can just clear out of here as fast as that crowbait will carry you. That's all I have to say to you, Clay Dimmit!"

Clay got down from his horse, which was by no means a crowbait, and looked at her with his lips tight from the restraint he put upon his desire to grab and kiss her again. The sight of her seemed to fill his stomach with feathers and make his blood run hot. She was everything he wanted in life. Desperately he sought a way to make her understand this. He wanted to tell her how much he loved her, how badly he needed her. But the words would not come.

"I—I didn't come to auger, Kate," he stam-

mered. "I—uh—it's about Blakeley. He's a bad one. You—he—"

"He's a gentleman, at least!" snapped Kate.

That made his cheeks burn and made him feel lower than a snake's belly. But it made him angry, too.

"Listen, Kate," he blurted. "We've knowed each other all our lives. But you don't know nothin' about Blakeley. He's after your spring. He'll do anything to git it! With you livin' alone—"

"I'll be able to see that nobody runs off with the spring some dark night," Kate broke in sarcastically. "Your concern over it is deeply touching! And now, even if you have nothing better to do, I have. Good-by!"

She had him licked again, no doubt of it. He chewed his wrath and didn't like the taste of it. But he held onto his temper anyhow, somewhat to his own surprise. In spite of an almost overwhelming desire to lay hands on her and try to shake some sense into her pretty stubborn head, he did nothing of the sort. He turned on his heel without a word, mounted his horse and rode away.

He did not tell even Laramie about his unsuccessful mission. He kept away from the claim for a full week, occupying himself with the many details of running the Diamond, while worry over Kate's stubbornness built up hour by hour and the hunger to see her gnawed at him constantly. Try as he would he could hit upon no plan to bring her to her senses.

"Saw Miss Kate in town," Laramie reported, one evening early in the next week after a trip to Sundance. "Her an' Blakeley. Seems he's beauin' her regular nowadays. Likewise," the Texan drawled, "he shore looked like the cat that et the canary. Miss Kate was lookin' mighty pert, too."

With that he went on about his business, while Clay resisted a strong desire to call him back and demand further details. If the fact that Blakeley was courting Kate had become known in Sundance, the affair must have got pretty far along. Just how far, he wondered, had Blakeley been able to bamboozle Kate with his smoothness? If she was looking mighty pert, it sure seemed as if the black-haired cuss was making progress.

"Mebbe he aims to marry her," he thought. "Mebbe—" He almost groaned aloud at the picture that came to him of Kate in Blakeley's arms, giving all her sweetness to the man he disliked and distrusted above all men. And because his opinion of the man was backed up by evidence which, if not positive enough to satisfy the law, was convincing to him as it had been to his father and Bill Minard, and as it was to Laramie and others, the thought of Kate marrying John Blakeley turned him sick. A man who hired gunhands and men on the dodge, who had below the Border connections that were secret and probably illicit, who was old as Blakeley and as experienced and hard beneath his surface smoothness, most certainly was not the man for Kate to marry!

"If he does marry her!" Clay muttered, "he's a schemin' crook. More'n likely he'll trick her. My gosh, there's got to be some way to open her eyes!"

Laramie's suggestion came back to him. But how could he throw a scare into Kate and at the same time make her see Blakeley in his true light? And how—which was vastly more important—could he make her understand that Clay Dimmit loved her? It couldn't be done by trickery. Leave that sort of thing to Blakeley. There must be some honest way to bring home the truth to her. Maybe if he humbled himself enough, and kept his temper, he could make her listen to him.

With this in mind, since no other plan was possible, he went down to the corrals after supper and roped a horse from his string. Laramie strolled up as he was about to mount.

"Goin' visitin'?"

Clay grunted and stepped into the saddle. But as the horse turned and started, Laramie laid a hand on its nose and stopped it.

"Mebbe I better side you," he suggested. "Mebbe the two of us could sort of throw a scare into her an' then you could show up."

"I'll handle it alone," Clay said. "Reckon it's too late to play games."

Then he rode away, leaving Laramie to stare after him until the dusk closed in behind him.

There were lights in the little house by the spring when Clay rode up the canyon an hour or so later. He rode slowly beneath the stars with the scent of the pines blowing into his face and the hoofbeats of his horse muffled by the soft turf. He still had no plan of approach, only a grim determination this time to make Kate listen and understand that he'd come because he loved her. He wasn't going to make the mistake again of giving her orders or arguing. He wasn't going to mention the spring or Blakeley, for neither was of importance compared to the simple fact that he loved and wanted the girl herself.

"Nothin' else matters," he told himself again and again.

He rode past the corral where Kate and Blakeley had made repairs that first morning. A horse stood outside the house, and at the sight of it something jerked taut inside him. He pulled rein, still at a little distance, knowing that it would be Blakeley's horse. Somehow he hadn't counted on finding the man here. It seemed to prove the truth of what Laramie had told him, and it hit him with all the sickening impact of a blow beneath the belt. He sat there, holding a tight rein on his horse, staring at Blakeley's horse and the lighted window beside the closed door.

"Mebbe I'm too late," he thought. "Mebbe he's already—" His lips tightened and he would not complete the thought. But he couldn't force himself to ride on up and dismount and knock at the door. He reckoned it would be better if he waited. Perhaps Blakeley would leave soon. Perhaps he'd ridden out from town with Kate and she'd asked him to stay for supper. It would be better to wait and try to talk to her alone.

"If I bust in with him there, I'll get myself into a jackpot pronto."

So he lifted his hand to turn his horse and ride around behind the corral, but as he did so the door swung open abruptly. Yellow lamplight spilled across the yard and he saw Kate and heard her speak.

"Good night, Mister Blakeley!"

Something in the tone of her voice tightened Clay's hand on the rein, stiffened him in the saddle. Beyond Kate he saw Blakeley move swiftly. The man caught the girl's wrist and swung her away from the door, back into the middle of the room.

"Not so fast, my dear! We're settlin' this proposition tonight. You don't understand."

The door slammed shut and Clay swung from the saddle. The horse snorted and shied away as his feet struck the compact earth, and he turned swiftly to confront a man who materialized suddenly out of the shadows alongside the house.

"Hold it!" growled this man. "You've figgered it wrong, mister! You should of headed that bronc back where you come from!"

Clay froze, his long legs well apart, left foot slightly in advance. Behind him his horse let loose a snort and another man spoke.

"Git his iron, Ace! We'll keep him comp'ny till the boss finishes his courtin'. Reckon he wouldn't want to bust in where he ain't wanted, would you, Dimmit?"

Clay said nothing. He recognized the voice without seeing the man. It belonged to Harp Bodin, Blakeley's range boss. And the man who faced him, the starlight glinting off the barrel of the gun in his hand, would be Ace Tucker. These two, Laramie had told him the other day, were wanted in Texas. If he'd needed proof of Blakeley's intentions, he had it now!

"Grab yourself a chunk o' sky!" growled Ace Tucker.

As he spoke there was a sudden explosion of sound inside the house. Kate cried out sharply. Something thudded against the door. Other thuds and the crash of breaking pottery gave proof that Kate was in trouble. Behind him Harp Bodin chuckled.

"Sounds like the boss done cotched him a bobcat! We better—"

Clay did some exploding on his own account. The threat of Tucker's gun meant nothing beside the fact that Kate needed help. He dove headlong at Ace, grabbed the long barrel of the gun, twisted it up and back as it boomed. The bullet tore over the hill and Tucker, with a startled yell, hurtled over Clay's back and plunged into Bodin. The two man went down, the breaths grunting out of them, while Clay's horse reared and crow-hopped.

Wheeling like an infuriated grizzly, Clay slammed the barrel of his own gun at a rising head, kicked a gun out of Bodin's hand, cracked the man above the ear with another slap of his long-barreled gun. Then, whirling again, he bolted across the yard and drove his shoulder against the closed door. The door burst inward, spilling him to his knees. But he held fast to his gun and his squinting eyes were upon the black-haired man who had Kate's arms twisted behind her and gripped both of her wrists in his left hand despite the girl's furious struggles.

"Clay!" screamed Kate. "Look out!"

As she screamed, she flung herself violently to the left and pulled Blakeley off balance as the man drew and fired. The bullet missed Clay by a yard and whanged into the end wall of the room. Then he was on his feet and Blakeley, with an oath, released the girl, leaped aside and fired again. His lead tore through Clay's mop of straw-colored hair and he fired again a split second after Clay's shot struck him. Blakeley's third bullet went into

the ceiling as he went backward against the wall.

Clay leaped across the room, to make sure that Blakeley was finished, but before he reached the man Kate screamed a warning and he whipped around as a thunderous report rocked the little house. It was Kate, firing her shotgun through the open door, where Ace Tucker leaped aside barely in time to escape the charge of buckshot. The blast of the shotgun blotted out the wavering lamplight, plunging the room into darkness. Clay reached Kate, flung a long arm around her and dragged her to the floor beside him. And right then a pandemonium of yells and hoofbeats and gunshots broke loose outside.

For half a minute they sprawled there, Clay's left arm hugging her close while she gripped the shotgun and pointed it at the open door and the sixgun in his right hand was ready. The uproar outside mounted high, but the meaning of it was not apparent. The warmth of Kate's body, crushed against him, spread over Clay and a queer kind of madness filled him.

"Kate!" he muttered, turning his head so that his lips touched her hair where it curled softly against her neck. "Kate, honey!"

And then, as suddenly as it had begun, the din outside ended. The shooting ceased, the yells died away, a kind of smothering silence closed in and seemed to drag on endlessly. Gun in hand, gun clasped tightly against his heart, Clay lifted his head and peered out into the starlight. He heard the soft sound of Kate's breath, felt her slim body quiver and press close to him. And regardless of all else a feeling of exaltation filled him. This was the way they belonged—close together, fighting against whatever might come.

A moving form loomed against the stars outside the door. Kate's body tensed as she gripped the shotgun.

"Hey!" called a familiar voice. "The war's over out here! How you doin', Clay?"

"Laramie!" sobbed Kate, and suddenly she went limp. "Oh, Clay, it's Laramie. The Diamond!"

Then unexpectedly she pulled away from him and scrambled to her feet as Laramie looked in through the door. Clay rose slowly.

Across the room Kate struck a match. Thought of Blakeley pulled Clay around alertly as lamplight flooded the room. He pulled around and jumped and kicked the gun out of reach of Blakeley's clawing left hand. He caught the man by the scruff of the neck and flung him back against the wall. Blood soaked Blakeley's shirt from the bullet wound in his right shoulder, but the gleam of his black eyes was vicious.

"Stay put!" Clay warned him grimly. "I don't aim to kill you, but don't let that give you ideas, blast you!"

"Mebbe," suggested Laramie, moving up beside him, "we better hobble the skunk."

"You come alone?" Clay asked. "Whatever made you show up?"

"Had a hunch," said Laramie casually. "Fetched along a couple of the boys, jest in case. They're ridin' herd on Bodin an' Tucker." He glanced sideways at Clay and grinned. "You must of had yourself a time!"

"Might of turned out different if you hadn't showed up when you did," said Clay. He dropped a hand on the Texan's shoulder and added: "Thanks, Slim!"

Turning, he looked across the room at Kate. There wasn't much color in her face and her dark eyes looked bigger and darker than ever. Her hair was a tumbled mass. There was a streak of blood on her chin, and her blouse was torn. But it seemed to him that she'd never looked lovelier. She stood with her back hard against the wall as if she needed its support, and her hands were tightly clenched and she would not look at him.

"Perhaps," she said unsteadily, "you don't want me at the Diamond now."

Clay took a deep breath. He felt no elated sense of victory, only a deep tenderness and a kind of awe. He went across the room and laid his hands gently on her shoulders and stood looking down at her until her eyes lifted slowly to his.

"Will you forgive me, honey, for bein' such a bull-headed idjut? An' plumb stupid, too. You see, Kate, I was too doggone dumb to know that I love you more'n anything on earth!"

"Oh, Clay!" she whispered. "I feel so—so dirty! That man—can you still—"

His lips stopped her words. He kissed her gently, and then strongly. His arms drew her close and her arms lifted and tightened about his neck. They were standing so when Laramie, having gone out the back door, came around to the front and looked in at them.

"My gosh!" said the Texan quietly. "It does look like the war was over! Say, you two, the moon's goin' to be right pretty while you ride home!"

AFTER leaving White Feather, the transcontinental slowed almost to a snail's pace as the two locomotives labored up the steep grade of Scudding Cloud Pass.

A porter came into the Pullman and began collecting Lyn's luggage.

"Are we almost at Twenty Sleep?" she asked him.

"Yessum. Ten minutes. Down the other side of the ridge."

A vague feeling of excitement ran through the girl. For five days she had been looking forward to this moment. It was foolish, though, to think she would step from the train at Twenty Sleep and find her father there to meet her.

The thought depressed her slightly. Suppose she asked herself, the whole trip proves futile? After all, she had no definite proof that her father was even alive.

She was leaning back toward the window to catch all the light possible while making repairs to her make-up, and so it was that she glimpsed the horseman in the tiny mirror which she had taken from her handbag.

At first she thought that the mirror must be playing tricks on her. She jerked around—and there he was, riding his horse alongside the train, looking in at her boldly, his mouth stretched wide in a grin.

Lyn was so surprised that for a moment she did nothing but stare. Outside the window, the horseman swept off his hat, made an elaborate bow, replaced his hat and then unmistakably winked.

Lyn froze, turning away coldly but still watching him from the corner of her eye. She saw the perturbed look come into his face. Then he was gone, leaning forward on his horse and racing ahead of the train.

Excitement stirred in her again. She had an urge to smile, but repressed it. After all, she was an Eastern girl with a proper bringing up, and she had heard enough stories about the primitiveness of the West and its coarse inhabitants to realize that the man on the horse was one who would interpret a smile of amusement as an invitation to become better acquainted.

Up ahead she heard a rattle and clatter as though one of the train doors were being opened. Then, quite clearly, she heard the colored porter's shout.

"Hello there, Mr. Jock! You all had me scared white, jumpin' from that horse that away."

A deep and laughing voice answered the porter. The Pullman door slammed shut. Passengers began leaning from their seats, looking up the aisle in eager expectancy.

Someone at the far end of the car suddenly shouted: "Hi yuh, Jock! How's things?"

The same deep laughing voice that had answered the porter replied, only nearer.

Lyn resolutely stared out at the passing landscape. Gradually she began to sense the presence of someone standing near. She fought the sensation as long as possible, then turned slowly to see who it was.

THAT EVERY American might be proud of his heritage—that was the goal old John Harrison set and Lyn discovered.

The cowboy was leaning indolently on the back of the seat ahead, grinning at her. Lyn returned his look without the slightest change of expression. The cowboy said:

"Hi, toots."

"I beg your pardon!"

"Ow!" The cowboy hunched his shoulders and turned up the collar of his silk purple shirt. "Pardon *me!*" he said.

A snicker ran up and down the car. Lyn felt that she was blushing, but her grey eyes contemplated the cowboy unwaveringly. "I think you must have made a mistake."

"Yeah." The cowboy slowly straightened. The grin disappeared from his face. "I guess I must have."

He moved on. Lyn turned her attention back to the passing landscape. Except for the fact that her cheeks were burning, her outward control was perfect.

Behind her she heard greetings and remarks as the cowboy passed on down the aisle. His name, she gleaned, was Jock St. Clair. He was well known, even to these passengers on a transcontinental train.

Lyn cast back in her mind for some other train of thought. It wasn't difficult. This trip that she was taking West was the most eventful thing that had ever happened in her life. Quite clearly she could hear again the worried, fretful voice of Eph Lardner, warning her.

"The West is still raw and untamed, Lyn. Especially the section you plan to visit. A woman traveling alone out there is apt—well, she might encounter unpleasant experiences."

PROUD HERITAGE

By RICHARD HILL WILKINSON

Eph was Uncle Jess's lawyer and administrator of the will.

"Nonsense! Arizona can't be as wild and lawless as we Easterners imagine. There will be forces of law and order to protect a woman traveling alone, I'm sure." She leaned forward, her eyes bright and eager. "You're quite sure my father is still alive, Mr. Lardner? You're quite sure he's living in this town called Twenty-Sleep?"

"I'm sure of nothing." The little lawyer removed his spectacles and began to polish them nervously. "All I know is that for the past sixteen years substantial sums of money have been mailed to your Uncle Jess twice annually with instructions that the amounts be used for your comfort and education. The

JOHN HARRISON and SKID SENECA

LYN LUCAS *JOCK ST. CLAIR*

letters which were enclosed with the money were never signed."

"But why is it I was never told of this? Why did Uncle Jess let me go on thinking my father was dead?"

"I don't know." Lardner replaced his spectacles and stared at her gravely. "Jess was very secretive about the whole business. My guess is that he thought your father *was* dead."

"Then who was sending him the money?"

"I don't know that either. Frankly, out of mere curiosity I suppose, I've tried to find out. Whenever I mentioned it, Jess would shut up like a clam. Still," the little man scowled, "Jess wasn't the type who would accept anonymous gifts unless he knew their source. Up until a few days ago I was satisfied that someone else, perhaps a near relative, was sending the money."

"And now you think it was my father?"

"I'm only guessing." Lardner riffled through

his papers on his desk, produced a newspaper clipping and passed it to Lyn. "Three days ago this clipping, together with another large sum of money and a letter similar to the others, arrived for Jess. Naturally it was turned over to me, since I am administrator of the estate."

Lyn's hand trembled slightly as she held the clipping and read. There was little in it that would interest a girl of nineteen. It was dated May 22, 1898, Phoenix, Arizona, and stated that a deposit of copper had been discovered near the shaft of what had once been a gold mine known as the Double Eagle. The owner,

JUDGE PLUMN

a John Harrison, was having difficulty in proving the right to his title.

Lyn looked up with a little frown. "But how does this—"

"The Double Eagle was the mine owned by your Uncle Jess. His partner's name was John Harrison."

"Then you think that this John Harrison may be my father?"

Lardner spread his hands. "There is that possibility. When Jess returned East, bringing you with him, he said that John Harrison had been killed in a landslide. He never admitted that John Harrison was your father. The whole thing could be a coincidence. There could be two Double Eagle mines. There could be two John Harrisons."

"But if that were true," Lyn cried excitedly, "why would anyone enclose this clipping with money they were sending for my welfare?"

Eph Lardner permitted himself the faintest of smiles. "As I mentioned before, a trip West for a lone woman would be a hazardous adventure. There is no assurance other than this flimsy evidence that such a journey would prove worthwhile. Still. . . ."

Alone that night in the old house on Beacon Street that she had always known as home, Lyn made her decision. Eph Lardner, who was old and surrounded by children and grandchildren, could not know how it was to be alone in the world, to have no blood relatives, to have your whole past shrouded in mystery.

"My father *is* alive," she told herself. "I know it. I feel it. John Harrison is my father. I'm going to find him. I'll be proud of him and he'll be proud of me."

THE train had gathered speed. They had topped the ridge and were racing down the western slope.

The porter suddenly appeared beside Lyn's seat. "Here we are, miss. Twenty Sleep." He gathered up her luggage and started down the aisle. Lyn rose, half turning as she did so.

Lyn's first impression of the town gave her a feeling of dismay. Behind the tiny, unpainted, weatherbeaten cracker box affair that was the station she saw a ragged, unpaved street, lined on both sides by more unpainted, weatherbeaten, false-fronted buildings.

There was not a tree anywhere in sight. The desert stretched away on all sides for endless miles. The sun beat down with incredible force.

Automatically she tipped the porter. She heard the conductor's long drawn out "booaard," and watched the train move away, conscious of a sense of being alone, of severing her last connection with the civilized world which she had always known.

She became suddenly aware that a half-dozen men were lounging on the station platform, and that all of them were watching her with bold, unrestrained interest.

A wizened and dirty-looking old Indian

was hunkered down with his shoulders against the side of the station. His black, expressionless eyes were studying her, too. A wave of revulsion swept through the girl. She turned away with an involuntary shudder.

At that moment a short man with a barrel-like body and a round, jolly face came puffing around a corner of the station. He trotted up, sweeping off the huge broad-brimmed hat that he wore to reveal an egg-shaped head that was completely devoid of hair.

"Criminy! Don't know how I happened to be late. Bertha didn't wake me up in time, that's why. Reckon you must be Lyn Lucas." He beamed.

Lyn stared at him in astonishment. "Why, yes. But how—"

"Eph Lardner wrote and said you was coming, that's how. I'm a lawyer, too. Also a judge. Judge Plumn is what they call me. Ferd Plumn is the name, but just call me Judge. Reckon Eph Lardner musta looked me up and found out I was honest. Wouldn't be hard. Reckon I'm the only honest judge within a hundred miles. As far as that goes, reckon I'm the only judge." He laughed merrily at his own joke, and picked up her bags. "Well, come along. Lardner wanted me and Bertha to look out for you till you found a place to live, which won't be easy. Not easy to find fit places, I mean. Not for a lady. . . . Hiya, Jock!" The talkative little man had broken off his speech abruptly and was looking behind Lyn.

Involuntarily she turned. Jock St. Clair was talking to the wizened old Indian. He glanced up as Judge Plumn's voice reached him.

"Hello, Judge. How's the missus?"

"Cantankerous, as usual. We get along, though. How long you staying?"

"Dunno. See you before I leave town."

During this conversation, St. Clair had not once met the girl's eyes. He swung his attention down to the Indian again.

Following Judge Plumn around the station to the buckboard that waited there, she thought: "He's showing his true colors now, talking to that dirty Indian as though they were equals." And she thought: "They probably are. A saddle bum and a filthy redskin."

JUDGE PLUMN'S house was located about a half-mile north of town. To Lyn's pleasant surprise, the building wore a coat of white paint. There was a patch of lawn in front, surrounded by a rail fence. The front veranda was shaded by two cottonwood trees. The place had an air of hominess about it, which Lyn could understand the moment she met Mrs. Plumn.

She was a plump, motherly sort of person, red-faced, fretful, neat as a pin. She took Lyn in her arms and kissed her, and Lyn immediately felt a warm glow of affection for the older woman.

"Drat that Eph Lardner. Letting a mite of a girl like you come way out here all by herself. Should have known better. Lucky thing he had sense enough to write the Judge. Ferd, bring Lyn's things into the front room. Stop gaping. You've seen pretty girls before, though I can't remember when. Land, you sure are pretty, Lyn!"

It was an honest compliment, and Lyn smiled with pleasure. Yet she had the feeling that there was something strange and unreal about all that was happening. Mrs. Plumn's effusiveness had seemed born of restraint, and the way Judge Plumn had gaped at her wasn't entirely because she was pretty.

Darkness had come when Lyn, dressed in navy blue slacks and red blouse, sat down for supper with the Plumns in their kitchen. A kerosene lamp on the table gave off a friendly glow. The food was plentiful and wholesome and cooked by an expert. Gradually the feeling of loneliness that she had been fighting since her arrival began to vanish.

She waited until the meal was finished before she asked her question.

"Did Mr. Lardner explain why I was coming out here? Did he say that I was looking for my father?"

Judge Plumn and his wife exchanged quick glances. The Judge said: "Reckon he did, Lyn. Reckon we know all about it." He glanced at his wife. "Jock St. Clair's in town."

"Jock!" Mrs. Plumn's round face beamed. "Why didn't you ask him out here to supper?"

"Didn't get around to it. He said he'd see us later, anyhow."

Mrs. Plumn turned to Lyn. "He must have been on your train. You must have seen him."

Lyn, more puzzled than annoyed at the turn the conversation had taken, said: "If you mean the cowboy who was talking to the Indian on the station platform, he boarded the train from the back of a running horse."

Both the Judge and Mrs. Plumn burst into gales of laughter.

"He would! Criminy! Jock never did things the way normal folks do. Can't seem to hold to convention at all. And him a college graduate."

"What?" Lyn felt a tingling along her spine.

"'S'right! Went to the state college in Tucson and got himself educated up as slick as a whistle. Didn't hurt him a mite. Now he's set himself up in business as a cattleman. Owns the Crying Bear Ranch."

Somehow hearing this news about Jock St. Clair made her feel a little foolish. And she was upset, too, at the Plumns' evasion of her question about her father.

She made hurried excuses and returned to her room, to think things out. Faintly she could hear the sound of laughter and music coming from the town. Impulsively she caught up a jacket, quietly opened the door into the hall, tiptoed to the outside door and went through it, closing it softly behind her.

The night air was cool and sharp. She began to walk, wanting to puzzle this thing out. Eph Lardner had had the key to the mystery about her father. Judge Plumn and his wife had it. Maybe Jock St. Clair had it too. Yet none of them wanted her to know. Why?

WITHOUT realizing it, she had reached the edge of the town. She hesitated, then started down the main street. Darkness had softened its harsh lines. Lights streamed from open saloon doorways and windows.

Three men came out of a saloon and stopped dead still at sight of her. Lyn could feel their bold, admiring stares. She drew her jacket tighter around her and moved across the street to the opposite side, turning north again.

The three cowboys moved across the street in her wake. Then suddenly, explosively Lyn's way was blocked. The doorway to a saloon had suddenly burst open. A figure had come catapulting out onto the sidewalk. It rolled up against an upright of a hitch-rail and groaned. Lyn shrank against the wall of the saloon. A half-dozen men had come tumbling out after the figure. One of them shouted: "There's the dirty redskin! Let's finish him off, boys!"

The half-dozen converged with wild shouts on the crouching figure of the Indian. He was the same she had seen on the station platform that afternoon. He tried to crawl away. A boot rose and was driven swiftly forward.

A wave of nausea ran through the girl as she heard the sickening crunch of the boot striking flesh and bone. More men appeared. They crowded around the miserable figure of the cowering redskin, fighting for a change to get in a blow. The three men who had been following Lyn joined the group.

Then suddenly a swift shadow was moving across the street. A tall, rangy figure was suddenly in among the crowd of men. There was the sound of a fist cracking into jaws. There were muttered oaths. A yell went up.

"It's St. Clair! Beat it!"

The crowd suddenly fell away. Men struggled to get away from those death-dealing, flaying fists of the tall cowboy. Three of them lay on the sidewalk, unconscious. Another tripped over his own feet, fell headlong and began to crawl. Jock St. Clair reached down, scooped the man up in his arms and hurled him bodily against the side of the saloon.

In that one moment Lyn caught a glimpse of St. Clair's face. It was terrible to behold. It was a face diffused with rage and bitterness. It seemed in that moment to be devoid of all human emotion. Then suddenly the street was empty, empty save for the still, bruised body of the old Indian, the tall cowboy and Lyn crouching against the saloon wall.

Jock St. Clair dropped to his knees beside the Indian and lifted him up tenderly. Men drifted up, stood about in a silent, curious group. Judge Plumn was hurrying up to her. The round little man's face was angry and concerned and relieved all at once.

"Lyn! You all right? You shouldn't have come here alone. I told you. Eph Lardner told you. You shouldn't have done it. This town's no place for a woman—a good woman—wandering around alone. What happened? What—"

The Judge broke off, staring toward Jock St. Clair, who still held the body of the old Indian in his arms. He swore softly. And Lyn, who had scarcely heard a word the fat man had spoken, said through stiff lips, her voice sounding strange and far away in her own ears:

"Judge Plumn, who—who is that Indian?"

Plumn whipped his glance around to the girl. His eyes opened wide, and his jaw dropped. He stared at her for a full minute

before replying, then his whole body seemed to sag.

"You might as well know it now. You'll find out sooner or later." He moistened his lips. "That Indian is John Harrison. He's your father!"

LYN WAS never sure how she reached Judge Plumn's house. But suddenly she was there, moving through the gate and up the walk. Judge Plumn was beside her, had a firm grip on her arm. The door of the cottage opened and Mrs. Plumn stood outlined in the lamplight.

The Judge said: "It was John. The boys were at him again. Jock got there just in time."

Bertha Plumn took one look at Lyn's face, and stepped quickly forward.

"My dear, my dear." And her arms went out and Lyn found welcome refuge in their shelter.

And then like a tidal wave the awful, hideous truth swept over the girl. A shame that seemed almost too great to bear possessed her. She pushed herself away from the older woman and ran blindly into the house.

In her room, she sat down on the bed. She was trembling violently.

"A half-breed!" The words burst from her lips in a choking sob. It was a small, pitiable almost inhuman sound. "And I condemned Jock St. Clair for even talking to that—that redskin."

Suddenly she laughed, remembering Jock St. Clair's insolence, his assumption that she would welcome any advances he might make.

"He knew who I was. Eph Lardner knew. The Plumns knew. Even Uncle Jess knew." Tears were streaming down her cheeks now. "I was so proud, so arrogant, so sure of myself. They all knew, and they felt sorry for me. They let me talk—and laughed to themselves behind my back. . . . An Indian! A dirty, filthy, wizened redskin." She shuddered convulsively and flung herself across the bed, her body racked with sobs.

The need to get away came to her. She must escape. She must hide her face and her shame from all the people she had known. Somewhere there was security. Somewhere, alone, with no one about who knew her dreadful secret, she would face this thing squarely, find a solution, an answer. She must.

She got her suitcase from beneath the bed. She put on her coat and opened the door

"All right, Seneca, I guess this is it."

a crack and listened. Faintly she could hear the murmur of voices coming from the rear of the house.

She looked back once over her shoulder. Somehow the small, friendly room brought on a feeling of nostalgia. It was symbolic of a world she must of necessity leave behind her forever. Ages and ages ago she had come here as Lyn Lucas, proud, beautiful, almost arrogant in her self-assurance. She was leaving it as the daughter of a dirty old Indian, beaten, whipped, ashamed to face the very people toward whom she had once felt superior.

Tears stung her eyes again. Swiftly she turned, stepped quietly into the hall, and closed the door firmly behind her. She started down the hall on tiptoe.

There was a second of silence, then came the crashing explosion of guns.

DOCTOR Tobias Enfield was as weather-beaten, as nondescript looking, as unimportant physically as the house in which he lived. He was a man of uncertain age with thinning brown hair, pale watery blue eyes, a huge beak of a nose and a completely indifferent attitude toward life and toward his patients.

If he was surprised when, replying to the insistent kicking on his front door, he opened it to find Jock St. Clair standing there with the limp body of John Harrison, the Indian, in his arms, his impassive features did not register the emotion.

"Come in," he said, before Jock could speak. He led the way through the living room to his small office in the rear with the air of a man who had done this many times.

"Put him down there." Enfield pointed to a high flat table covered with a white cloth.

Tenderly Jock laid his burden on the white cloth.

"He's badly beaten up, Doc. Maybe he's dead. I want—"

"Wait in there."

Enfield spoke mildly, nodding toward the living room, but there was a quality of command in his voice.

Jock met the other's eyes for a moment, then swore softly and strode out of the room. In the living room he sat down on a straight back chair and produced the makings and rolled himself a cigarette.

Outwardly, you would have thought him completely in control of his emotions. Yet if you looked closely you could not fail to see

that there was a tenseness about that huge frame. He sat too straight in the chair for a man completely at his ease. His left fist was balled up into a knot. He dragged too frequently on his cigarette.

There was a long period of waiting. Then the door to the doctor's office opened. Jock leaped to his feet. Enfield, his face expressionless as always, stepped quietly into the room and closed the door.

"Is he dead?"

Enfield lifted mild, impassive eyes. "Not quite. There isn't much chance that he'll live, though."

"He's got to live!" Jock's voice was a grating rasp. His lips were bare across his teeth. He had seized a handful of Enfield's shirt and had twisted it into a ball. "You hear me, Enfield? He's got to live!"

"Let go of me, Jock."

"Damn you, listen!"

"Let go of me!"

For one brief uncertain minute the impassive, watery eyes of the medical man, and the hot demanding gaze of the younger man clashed.

For a moment. Then Jock St. Clair released his grip. His body sagged. "Sorry, Doc." And he asked humbly: "What can I do?"

"You can get a woman to come here and look after John."

"A woman?"

"He needs care, constant care. He needs to be watched over, administered to. He needs the kind of gentle care that only a woman can give."

Jock St. Clair stared at Enfield for a full minute, and his thoughts were in a turmoil. His mouth formed into a thin straight line. Abruptly he turned toward the door.

"All right. I'll get a woman. I'll have her here within an hour."

The cold clear air of the night struck him sharply. He started along the walk toward the bright lights of the town's saloons, and stopped abruptly.

A voice came out of the darkness.

"Jock!"

A shadow moved, and a figure was suddenly on the sidewalk beside him. Jock peered through the pale light.

"Bass!"

It was Bass Leonard, his foreman. Even as he spoke, another figure materialized out of the darkness. A soft voice spoke, and he knew it to come from Pratt Halliday, another of his riders.

"Hello, boys. They got John. Almost killed him. He's at Doc Enfield's now."

"Yeah, we heard."

BASS LEONARD hitched up his belt a little, and a half-smile touched his lips. "We figured you might have come in on the afternoon train, so we drifted into town." He paused. "The boys are camped in a little coulee about five miles west."

But Jock was listening with only half an ear. It was too dark to catch the significance of the expressions with which the two men were watching him.

He said, the same train of thought still running through his mind. "John might die. He needs a woman to look after him. There's one here whose rightful place is at John's bedside. I'm going to get her."

Far, far to the west they heard the faint breath of a train whistle. The eastbound was thundering down out of the pass toward the railroad station at Twenty Sleep.

"Wait, Jock!"

Jock had turned away, and Bass Leonard grasped his arm.

"Skid Seneca's at the Straight Shooting. His gang's with him. He wants you to know he's there."

"To hell with Seneca! He can wait!"

"He can't. Listen to me. He's found out about the girl. He's found other things too."

"Other things?"

Jock hesitated, caught by something in Bass' voice. He ran a tongue along his lips. "You mean—"

"Yes." Leonard nodded soberly. "It's a showdown, Jock. Seneca holds the cards. He's got the crowd with him. We've got to act fast. Now!"

Still Jock hesitated. He glanced once toward Doc Enfield's house behind the lighted windows of which John Harrison lay dying. He heard again, louder now, the whistle of the approaching train. Curiously, for some reason he couldn't explain, the sound woke in him an urgency.

He shook off Bass Leonard's restraining hand.

"Seneca will have to wait," he said again, harshly. "John's dying." He started along the street, swung sharply down an alley and tramped along behind the Straight Shooting Saloon. He heard the noise and laughter and

music behind the flimsy wall, and had the feeling that Seneca had called his bluff and he was evading the issue.

He swore softly beneath his breath, aware that Bass and Pratt were directly behind him, wondering what they were thinking.

Unconsciously he quickened his pace, as though wanting to get beyond the sounds of the saloon because the noise whipped his temper raw, because he wanted to go in there and face Skid Seneca once and for all, bringing this business to a head.

It wasn't hard to picture the big red-headed, hulking brute standing at the bar, tossing off his drinks, smirking triumphantly because of the new knowledge he had gained—knowledge that meant almost certain victory in his fight to gain possession of the property where the old Double Eagle mine was located and where, three months ago, a vein of copper ore had been discovered.

By all the common rights of man the property belonged to John Harrison. Records showed that John and a man named Jess Lucas had staked a claim here years ago. John Harrison had lived at the site of the old gold mine for the past twenty years. But he was an Indian, and this was at a time when Indians were denied the right to own property outside their reservations.

Skid Seneca, a mining man, had come into the country when he heard news of the copper strike near the Double Eagle. He had found the vein rich. He found also that all that stood in his way was an ignorant old Indian who lived in an adobe hut close by, and claimed that the property belonged to him.

Seneca got a laugh out of that. He'd never considered Indians as people. They were dirty, ignorant, sometimes troublesome and had to be slapped down.

So Seneca threw John Harrison off the place and went to work with his crew, preparing to mine the copper. Two days later John Harrison came back. With him were Jock St. Clair and twelve cowboys. They were a sober-looking lot and they were all armed.

AT FIRST Seneca thought it was some kind of joke. Jock had started to explain certain things to the man, but gave up when Seneca only stared at him blankly. He simply told the big redhead to take his crew and get out and stay out.

Seneca, outnumbered and taken completely by surprise, obeyed. But he was boiling. He thought St. Clair must be crazy to take the part of an Indian against a white man. Within the next few days he discovered that a lot of other people around Twenty Sleep were crazy too. They actually regarded Indians as human beings.

Seneca didn't quit. He wanted that mine and he intended to have it, no matter the cost.

Jock realized that Seneca would learn that technically John Harrison couldn't claim rightful title to the property because he was an Indian. So he talked the matter over with Judge Ferd Plumn, and then sent a check and a newspaper clipping to Eph Lardner in Boston, Massachusetts.

Up to a point things had developed quite as he expected. Jock had erred when he dramatized himself by boarding the train from the back of a running horse. He had wanted to impress the girl. He had wanted to thrill her in a manner that would be symbolic of the West and awaken her interest.

Instantly he had realized his mistake. Lyn Lucas was an ultra modern and sophisticated Easterner, with no knowledge or understanding of the West. Instead of being impressed, she had been revolted.

And so Jock had, in a manner of speaking, retired from the scene. He would leave the completion of the rest of his plan to Judge Plumn and his wife. It wasn't going to be easy. Lyn Lucas had to be convinced that the Indian blood she had in her veins was a proud heritage. She must be made to realize that staying here and claiming her father's property was important. She was half white. Her claim would be legal. Everything hinged on that.

The Plumn cottage was ablaze with lights when Jock and his two companions reached it. The door opened instantly when Jock knocked. The Judge, his face worried and perturbed, stood in the doorway. Behind him, Bertha's apple-like visage peered out at the men.

"Jock! Thank heaven you're here. Lyn has gone!"

"Gone?" Jock stared at the jurist blankly.

"She went to her room after we got back. Bertha and I thought it best to leave her alone for a while. Later we found her gone, together with all her things."

Out on the plain west of the town the eastbound was slowing for its brief stop at Twenty

Sleep. Its whistle was a shrill blast on the still, cold air.

Bertha said, almost moaning: "It's too late. You can never get to the station now."

Jock swore and started away, and Bass Leonard said, "Wait!" He caught Jock's arm, his voice suddenly hoarse and imperious: "Damn you, Jock, listen to me! You're going off half cocked about this thing. You're sticking your chin out. I tell you, Seneca's found out too much. He knows about the girl. She's his only real threat now. Do you realize what that means?"

Pratt Halliday suddenly yelled: "Listen!"

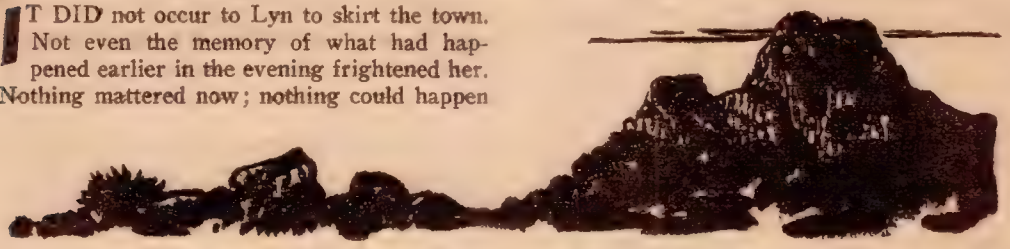
From the direction of town they all heard the blast of guns, interspersed with wild yells, and then the beat and drum of galloping horses. A woman screamed. It was the high-pitched, hysterical scream of a woman in mortal terror.

Momentarily the blasting of the locomotive's whistle drowned out the noise, and in that moment Bass Leonard yelled in Jock's ear:

"It's the boys! I knew this would happen. They got restless. Maybe it's lucky. Maybe they got there in time to save the girl. We better find out."

The three men began running in the direction of the lights and the noise. . . .

IT DID not occur to Lyn to skirt the town. Not even the memory of what had happened earlier in the evening frightened her. Nothing mattered now; nothing could happen that could be worse than what had already happened. Her mind, her whole being was consumed by the single thought of escape.



Instinctively she kept in the shadows of the buildings on the opposite side of the street. Faintly she heard the whistle of the approaching locomotive, and quickened her pace.

She passed the last of the darkened stores. Ahead lay an open space, and beyond this she could make out the dark silhouette of the cracker box station. To the right there was a dull red glow moving against the sky, and this was the train thundering across the plain toward the town.

Lyn stepped out of the shadows and began hurrying across the open space—and suddenly her way was blocked by two towering figures.

She turned aside to move past them, but a hand reached out and caught her arm, and a voice said, "Just a minute. Ain't you the Lucas girl?"

Lyn jerked at her arm. "Let me go! Take your hands off of me!"

The man thrust his face close to her own. "It's her all right. Joe, get Seneca."

The second man grunted, and Lyn heard the rapid beat of his feet moving away. She jerked again in an attempt to free her arm, but the hand that held her was like a steel band.

"Let me go! Let me go!" There was panic in her voice. The onrushing train was almost at the station. It was slowing down. The locomotive's headlight picked up the two standing in the clearing.

Lyn saw her captor's grinning face. She tried mightily to free her arm as the screeching of the eastbound's brakes came to her. She saw the warmly lighted and friendly windows of the coaches. A sob escaped her throat.

"Let me go! Please let me go!"

Two men were suddenly beside her. One was the man called Joe. The other was a huge bulky figure with red hair and the cruelest face she had ever seen.

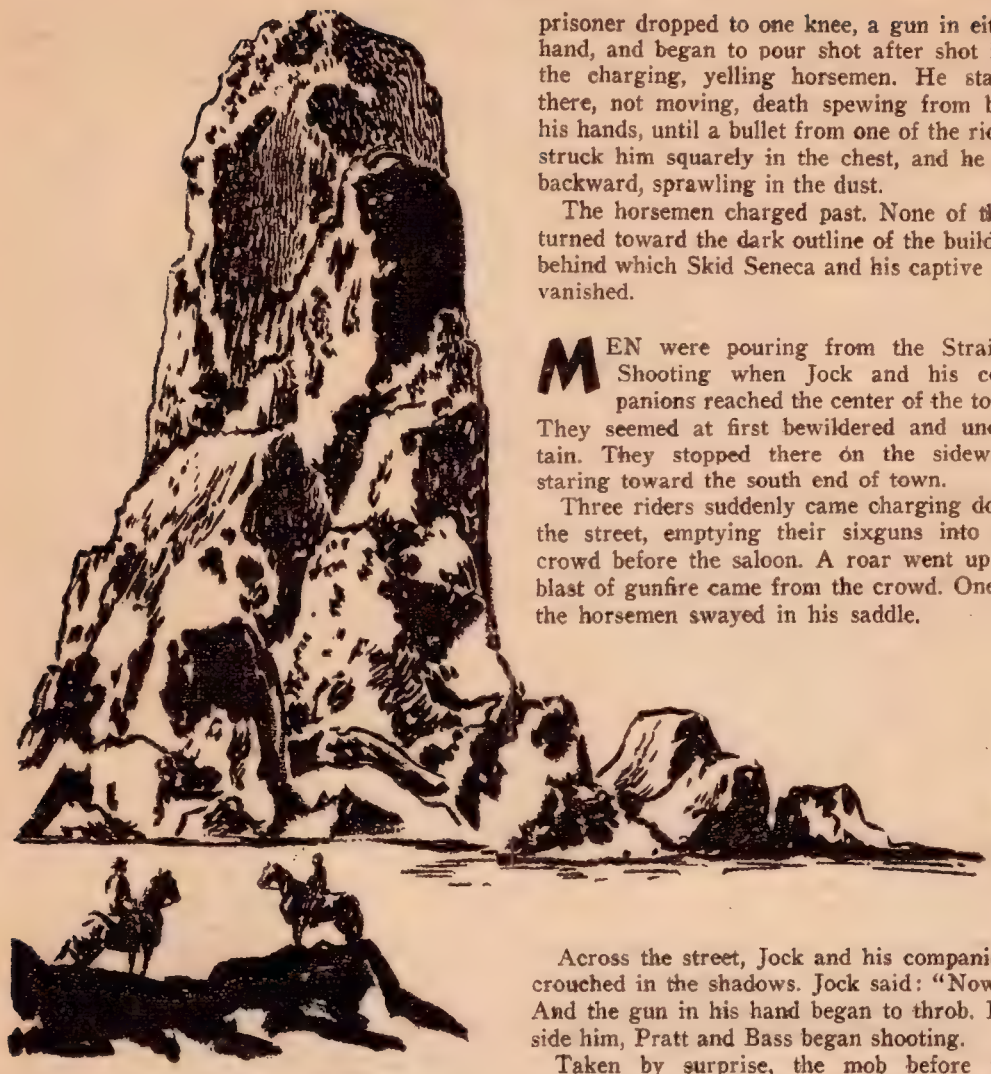
The redhead said: "It's her. Good work, boys." He leered at Lyn. "You're not leaving town right yet, Miss Lucas. There's a couple of papers you've got to sign first."

"Papers." Lyn stared at him. "What in the world are you talking about? Tell your men to release me. I—I'll call a policeman."

The redhead's face broke into a grin. "Now, there's an idea." He laughed. "Trouble is we don't have policemen on every corner out here."

Over at the station the eastbound had come to a stop. A lantern was waving. She could hear the conductor's long drawn out "booaaard!" The train began to move.

Frantically she turned toward the redhead. "Please let me go. I—"



There was the sudden, thundering crash of hoofbeats. There were fierce wild yells. The open space behind the station was suddenly alive with swiftly moving shadows.

A shot rang out and then another. The man who had been called Joe let out a gurgling, sobbing cry, and suddenly pitched headlong to the ground, his face plowing into the dust.

Lyn screamed. Her own voice was a shrill, high-pitched sound in her ears. She screamed, and kept on screaming. Skid Seneca cursed and slapped a huge hand across the girl's mouth, shutting off the awful, hysterical sound. He picked her up in his arms and began running with her toward the nearest of the darkened buildings.

Behind him, the man who had held Lyn prisoner dropped to one knee, a gun in either hand, and began to pour shot after shot into the charging, yelling horsemen. He stayed there, not moving, death spewing from both his hands, until a bullet from one of the riders struck him squarely in the chest, and he fell backward, sprawling in the dust.

The horsemen charged past. None of them turned toward the dark outline of the building behind which Skid Seneca and his captive had vanished.

MEN were pouring from the Straight Shooting when Jock and his companions reached the center of the town. They seemed at first bewildered and uncertain. They stopped there on the sidewalk, staring toward the south end of town.

Three riders suddenly came charging down the street, emptying their sixguns into the crowd before the saloon. A roar went up. A blast of gunfire came from the crowd. One of the horsemen swayed in his saddle.

Across the street, Jock and his companions crouched in the shadows. Jock said: "Now!" And the gun in his hand began to throb. Beside him, Pratt and Bass began shooting.

Taken by surprise, the mob before the saloon whirled. Two of them dropped in their tracks. It looked like a trap. For a moment they hesitated. More horsemen were charging down the street, yelling and shooting as they came. Another of the crowd fell to his knees. Then of one accord they turned and stampeded into the saloon.

Jock stepped into the street and hailed one of the passing horsemen.

"Grat! Where's the girl?"

The rider, a young, wild-eyed looking lad, his face aglow with the heat of the excitement, pulled in his pinto and grinned.

"Hello, boss. Some fun, eh? What girl?"

"Damn you!" Jock swore. "You must have seen her. You must have heard her yell."

"Yeah." Grat Tenar's face cleared sudden-

ly. "There was a girl. I heard her scream. She was over there near the station."

The horsemen had reined up in front of the saloon and were yelling insults at the men inside, interspersing their words with shots.

Bass Leonard appeared beside Jock, and Jock said: "Take charge of this bunch of hellions, Bass. Tell 'em to keep that gang in the saloon till I get back."

He darted away, running swiftly up the street toward the railroad station. He found the open space deserted, save for the still, lifeless figures of Skid Seneca's two henchmen.

He struck a match and found footprints that led him in behind the nearest darkened building. Beyond, he found where the man on foot had come to a horse and mounted and ridden away.

Jock swore again, and went through an alley that took him back to the town's main street. Directly opposite was Doc Enfield's shack. The medical man was standing on his steps, looking down toward the Straight Shooting where there was still noise and confusion.

"Doc!" Jock was almost up to the little man before he spoke. Enfield turned.

"Hello, Jock. Been looking for you."

"For me? What's happened?"

"John Harrison died five minutes ago."

THE hand that had been clamped across Lyn's mouth relaxed. She gasped in a great lungful of air. An amused voice said into her ear:

"Yell now if you want to."

The horse on which they had been riding stopped. Lyn was lowered to the ground. She sank to her knees, weak and trembling and dazed. Beneath her she could feel the rough gravel and shale of the desert, still warm from the day's sun.

Darkness, tempered only by the dim light of the stars, hemmed her in on all sides. She could make out the dim outline of the horse and rider above her. She heard the faint whisper of the wind through manzanita and sage and greasewood.

The taunting, amused voice of Skid Seneca came to her again. "Ma'am, you're valuable cargo. We almost didn't make it."

A tremor ran through the girl. A hideous fear and terror squeezed at her vitals. She began to crawl away. She staggered to her feet and began to run. She was like a wild thing, driven on by panic and stark madness, heedless of pain, of weariness, of the strain on her tortured lungs. She went on and tripped and fell. Fell hard, bruising herself, knocking her senses into oblivion. She lay still, sprawled out there on the ground, a pitiable, beaten figure.

Skid Seneca rode leisurely up to where the girl lay. He looked down at her and laughed contemptuously. "Squaw girl."

Lyn stirred and lifted her head and saw him there, and began to cry.

"Shut up!"

Seneca suddenly stiffened in his saddle. He sat with his head cocked, listening intently.

And then Lyn heard it too; a low rumbling sound that grew into a steady roar. She knew it to be the beat of many running horses, and for a moment her hopes lifted, then died. Watching Seneca, she knew that these riders who were approaching had not come to save her.

The roar was almost upon them now, and Seneca stood in his stirrups, lifting his voice.

"Duke!"

The roaring and drumming broke and lost its rhythm. Horsemen came crashing through the brush, vague shadows. The blowing of the animals was a strange, hard sound on the night air. They grouped around Skid Seneca, and saw the crumpled figure on the ground and stared at it.

Someone said, "The squaw girl!" And there was general laughter.

Lyn shuddered, shame burning her cheeks

even in this moment of terror and fear. Squaw girl! She heard the name again, like a knife thrust through her heart.

Then Seneca's voice said harshly: "That can wait! Those papers have got to be signed first." She heard the name of Jock St. Clair and the name of the Crying Bear, his ranch. "Burn the damn place to the ground! That'll teach him! The lousy meddler. Him and his pussy-footin' methods!"

The men were forming into a compact group, with Duke at their head. Someone led a horse up. Ungentle hands lifted Lyn up and placed her into the saddle. The hands pawed her and there was bawdy laughter.

Then Seneca rode up, speaking sharp, imperious orders.

"Duke, take the boys on to the Crying Bear. Do your work, then ride on to the hide-out. I'll meet you there."

The roar of running horses filled the night again. The moving shadows dissolved into the darkness. The sound of their retreat lessened, then dimmed and finally died.

Lyn clung to the pommel of her saddle. Seneca held the reins in one hand, his own in the other. They moved along at a fast gait.

She tried to puzzle it out why it was they had made her prisoner. It had something to do with her father, with the Indian, John Harrison. Jock St. Clair and Judge Plumn were mixed up in it too.

What was it all about? In what remote way could she be connected with these things that were happening? What had she done to deserve this treatment? What was the significance of the papers they wanted her to sign?

FAINTLY to the south she could see a glow against the sky. The glow brightened, and she knew it to be the town. Suddenly they swung sharply to the left. They entered what appeared to be a gate overgrown with shrubbery. They rode through a long avenue of high growing bushes, emerged into a clearing. A house loomed ahead. The horses stopped.

Seneca said: "Get down!" And kept hold of her wrist after she had dismounted.

He opened a door and led her into a pitch black room. She heard a bolt slide into place. Instinctively she backed away, came to a wall and flattened against it.

A match flared. In the upthrust of light she saw Seneca's heavy features. He applied the match flame to a lamp and turned the wick up high.

Yellow light drove the shadows into their corners. Lyn was vaguely aware of a rather large room, comfortably furnished; a fireplace, a desk, a couch, chairs.

Seneca looked at her with a faint smile on his lips. His eyes narrowed speculatively as he allowed his glance to travel from the tips of her shoes to the top of her bare head.

"Relax. None of the boys are here. No one here to harm you—but me."

The significance of the words struck a new terror to her heart. She flattened still further against the wall.

"Squaw girl!" Seneca threw back his head and laughed. He went to a cupboard, took down a glass and bottle and poured himself a stiff drink. He strode across the room and stood in front of the cringing girl.

For a moment he just stood there, and she could feel his small gleaming eyes appraising her. Suddenly his hand went out and caught her beneath the chin and lifted up her face. Dumbly she submitted to the scrutiny. Her lower lip was trembling. She closed her eyes, steeling herself for what was to come.

"Not bad," Seneca said roughly. "I see now what the boys were talking about. Maybe I overlooked something." He let go her chin and lifted his glass. "To the best-looking squaw girl I ever had the pleasure of meeting."

He swallowed the fiery liquid in a single gulp, laughed again and walked over to the desk. He opened a drawer, took out a sheaf of papers, studied them briefly and then spread one out on the desk.

"Come here."

Lyn remained frozen, glued to the wall.

"Come here!" He came across the room in quick strides, seized her wrist and jerked her toward the desk. He thrust a pen into her hand. "Sign!"

From somewhere Lyn found courage. From some remote corner of her being a spirit, a quality that had been part of her without her realizing it, sent faint color coursing back into her cheeks.

"Why? What is it? Why should I sign?"

"Never mind what it is. You'll sign because I say so."

"Then what?"

Seneca's lips parted. "Then we can amuse ourselves the way all squaw girls like to be amused by white men."

"You—you rat!" It was instinct alone that prompted the words and the action that followed. "You call yourself a white man! You rotten scum! If you're an example of what white men are like, then I'm glad I'm an Indian."

The bottle of ink that Seneca had uncorked was within an inch of Lyn's hand. Her fingers closed about it. She threw it with all her strength, straight into the burly redhead's ugly face.

She heard the bottle strike, heard the startled grunt that came from the man. She saw the black fluid spread over his face and run down into his eyes, saw him clawing to free his vision, heard his enraged curse. Then she

turned and ran. She reached the door, breathing a prayer of thanksgiving when she saw the key in the lock. She tried to turn it and it stuck and she tried again, frantically, hearing Seneca's pounding footsteps behind her.

Then the bolt shot back and she jerked open the door and sped outside. She saw the avenue of trees and rushed into the black tunnel and kept going, stumbling, but running swiftly. Behind, she could hear Seneca.

DISMAY filled the girl. She realized suddenly that escape was impossible. In a moment Skid Seneca would overtake her. And then abruptly something happened.

Her way was blocked. A figure had risen up from the ground and was standing directly in her path. She could not check her headlong rush. She crashed into the figure, impulsively crying out.

Strong arms put her one side, and a familiar voice said: "Get down! Lie flat on the ground!"

Automatically she obeyed. Above her she heard the same familiar voice. "All right, Seneca, I guess this is it."

There was a split second of silence. Then the still night air was shattered by the crashing explosion of guns. Two figures were revealed in the ghastly glare.

Directly above her Jock St. Clair stood in a half crouched position, the gun in his hand held close to his body at hip level. Ten feet away, facing Jock, was Skid Seneca. In the brief instant in which the ghostly light from the exploding guns illuminated the scene Lyn saw that Seneca was bent forward. His gun was aimed at the ground. His face was twisted into an expression of rage and pain.

Then the brief vision vanished. Darkness settled down once more. Darkness a hundred times more black after that bright flash of light.

Darkness and silence. The silence grew and became an eternity of time. Lyn had the feeling somehow that she was alone. She sat up, holding her breath, straining all her senses. Gradually her eyes became accustomed to the darkness again. Directly overhead she saw the stars, white and cold above the tops of trees. She got to her feet. An eeriness swept over her. Jock St. Clair and Skid Seneca had disappeared as completely as though the ground had opened up and swallowed them.

She turned toward the opening at the end of the avenue of trees away from the house. And just then she heard a crashing in the bushes far off to the left. There was a muttered, hoarse curse. Then hoofbeats crashed through the night air.

A shot rang out. Another.

Someone was moving back through the brush, back to the spot where Lyn stood. She tried to move, to run. It was as if all her limbs had suddenly become paralysed. She couldn't move a finger.

"Miss Lucas!"

Lyn opened her mouth and closed it and tried again. "I'm here."

Jock St. Clair stepped out into the open. His figure was a tall silhouette against the far opening of the tunnel.

"You're not hurt?"

"Mostly frightened."

For a moment he said nothing. She had the feeling that uncertain thoughts were running through his mind, as though he wanted to say something and did not know how to put it into words. She was the first to break the silence.

"Did—what happened?"

"Seneca got away." He paused. "Was there anyone else here besides you two?"

"No one that I saw."

He turned, looking back toward the house. "Come with me, please."

Obediently she followed him back through the trees to the house and inside. He did not look at her, but let his eyes rove about the room. He saw the desk and went to it quickly and picked up the paper that was lying there. He read it rapidly, then looked toward her, his expression faintly alarmed.

"He wanted you to sign this?"

"Yes."

"But you didn't? You signed nothing?"

"No. I—I threw the bottle of ink at him and ran."

He studied her for a long minute after that. She thought there was something like surprise in his eyes.

"Good girl!" He came toward her, tearing up the paper and throwing the bits toward the fireplace. "You've been hurt."

"It's nothing. A thorn scratched my cheek." She was amazed at her own self-control, at the comfort and feeling of security his mere presence gave her.

"Sit down, please. You've lost a lot of blood. Your system has had a shock. Right now you're holding up on nerve alone. Once a reaction sets in there might be some ill effects. Wait here a moment."

HE DISAPPEARED through one of the doors, returning a moment later with a basin of water and a towel. He bent over her where she had seated herself near the fireplace. His fingers were surprisingly gentle.

She saw the dampened towel turn red, and for the first time realized how seriously she was hurt. Woman-like, she thought: "I must look terrible." And then the bleak, stark hideousness of what she was and who she was surged upward in her breast, and the hopelessness came back. What difference did it make how she looked? She was a half-breed!

Jock St. Clair stepped back and said: "There, the bleeding's stopped. It's a rather ugly gash but I doubt if there'll be a scar."

She said, suddenly remembering: "You shouldn't stay here. They've gone to burn your ranch. I heard them talking."

A half-smile twisted his lips. "I'm not surprised. It's too late to stop them now. Be-

sides, there are more important things to attend to."

"More important than protecting your home?"

"I am protecting my home—by being here, talking to you. I—we need your help."

"My help?" She stared at him. "What are you talking about? How can I be of help to anyone? It's I who needs help."

He nodded soberly. "I know. Perhaps we can be of help to each other. Miss Lucas, your father died in Doc Enfield's office two hours ago."

Her only reaction to that was one of relief, of being mercifully unshackled from a tremendous burden. She said nothing, and Jock St. Clair continued: "Do you realize what that means? Did you know your father?"

"I know he was a dirty, wizened-up Indian. I know that because of him my whole life is ruined. I know that I'll never be able to face my friends again. I know that—"

She stopped, her tongue stilled by the look of shock that had come in Jock St. Clair's eyes.

"That opinion," he stated with icy bluntness, "is shared by the man who just left here. And he in turn shares it with a number of other equally admirable figures who work for him. They all belong to the same breed." He leaned toward her. "Did you tell Skid Seneca how you felt? You would have had an appreciative audience. Had he known he might have been more agreeable."

The implication stung her. Color flowed into her cheeks. She remembered the words she had hurled at Seneca. "If you're a white man, I'm glad I'm an Indian." And she wondered at the words and what deep-seated quality in her had prompted them.

She said levely: "What is it you want? Have you papers to be signed too?"

"I want nothing for myself. I want only to see the work that John Harrison began carried on."

"Work? What kind of work?"

"It was John's brains and John's money that began and sponsored the movement now afoot in Washington to give the Indians more rights as human beings, to offer them opportunity, to provide them with better living conditions, to give them a chance to cope with the so-called superior intelligence of the whites. That's all the Indians want, Miss Lucas: a chance. It isn't much to ask. They are a proud people. Oppression is breaking their spirit, slowly killing them. What's happening to the Indian today is nothing short of murder."

"And what has this to do with me?" Lyn laughed bitterly. "How will it benefit me?"

"Your father was a wise man, Miss Lucas. Wiser than any white man I have ever known. He was an Indian and the Indians are a beaten race, and so he would not go to Washington himself. He provided the money for others to go. He outlined the bill that is now before Congress. Now that he's dead, his property will be confiscated, unless—"

"Ah!" Lyn suddenly sat upright. "I think I begin to see. I am the legal heir to John Harrison's copper mine. That was the paper Skid Seneca wanted me to sign—a deed giving him title to the property."

"Yes, that was it."

"And now you want me to claim the property, sell it and provide funds to carry on the movement. That's why you wanted me to come out here. That's why I was told that that Indian was my father. Loss of the property was threatened anyhow." Her voice was rising passionately. "You had to have someone . . . civilized, someone with white blood in her veins to claim the title." Tears stung her eyes. "I was happy. I was contented. I was getting

along fine. You had no consideration for me. You had to ruin my life. You had to kill my dignity and self-respect and take away all the joy that I knew because a lot of dirty Indians were not satisfied with their way of life."

HER eyes were blazing. "What you did was cruel and unkind and unjust. I—I hate you and all the others for doing it."

Jock St. Clair said coldly: "You didn't have to come. You weren't even asked. You insisted. You wanted to find your father. Now you've found him, and you lack the traits of character a good many of us thought you might possess simply because you are John Harrison's daughter.

"Listen to me, do you know why you were taken back East and given your chance in the white man's world? It was because John Harrison insisted. He knew that when you grew to womanhood you wouldn't be given a chance in this world because you were half Indian. So he asked Jess Lucas, his partner, to bring you back East and raise you in the white world of which Jess was a part.

"There was no landslide. That was a story that Jess and John cooked up between them to tell you when you became old enough to ask the inevitable questions. The gold mine that they owned had petered out. John Harrison worked like a dog for years so that he could send money to Jess for your comfort and education. He had no ideas of value. He sent more than was needed. That is the money that bought you those clothes that you're wearing right now.

"The rest of the money—what John had saved from his gold mining experiment with Jess—he used to begin his great work in Washington for the benefit of all Indians, to change things in this country of ours so that if ever again there was a girl or a man who had Indian and white blood in his veins at the same time he could hold his head up high and face the world and be proud of both."

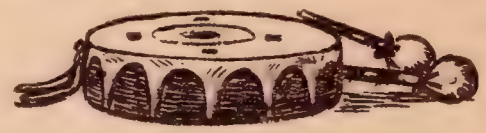
For a time after Jock finished speaking there was silence. Lyn stared at the floor. A hundred thoughts were running through her mind, a hundred conflicts were churning her brain into a turmoil.

She lifted her head at last and looked at St. Clair squarely.

"I have nothing to thank John Harrison for. What he did to me was worse than if he had kept me here and raised me as an Indian. He taught me a different way of living, and now I've been reduced to the level of a savage, and expected to live like one. Why should I help you? There is no place in the civilized society of America for a half-breed. I am neither one nor the other. I'm nothing."

"There is less place in society for a coward and a quitter. America has many problems such as yours. America is a young country. It is free. There is opportunity here. It is the only place on earth where there is still a chance for such problems to be solved. They will never be solved if people such as you quit on the job. You're in a position to help greatly. You can do your best to make a place for yourself and the generations that are to come—or you can remain miserable and beaten and unwanted. No one can answer that question but yourself."

The western window was suddenly lighted by a dull glow. Jock looked that way and then went to the door and opened it. A crimson light that grew brighter and brighter was reflected against the sky. He stood there looking at it, his face expressionless, knowing that it was his ranch that was burning, knowing that the months and years of toil that he had invested to create that home were being destroyed in the brief span of minutes.



Yet his face remained immobile, save for a certain tightening of his mouth. He heard a step behind him, but did not turn.

Lyn Lucas' voice came to him: "Jock, did you know my mother?"

"I knew her. I was small but I knew her. She died when you were born."

"What was she like, Jock?"

"She was good and fine. She came out here with her first husband. He was killed in a barroom brawl and Anna was left alone. John was a young buck then, a handsome, reckless fellow, well liked, gentle in his ways, respectful. He was kind to your mother. They were married by a white parson and lived in the manner of white people until you were born."

For a long while Lyn was silent. They stood together watching the flaming light against the sky, watched it brighten and diminish and die to a dull glow. And the thought ran through Lyn's mind: "This was more im-

portant to him than saving his own home. He risked his life trying to save my father. Why?"

She touched his arm, and he looked down at her, his dark eyes questioning.

"There's something here I don't understand. Back there when Skid Seneca sent his men off to burn your ranch things were said that I am only just now remembering. Why are you willing, even eager to sacrifice so much? Why have you such a great interest in me? What goal are you striving to reach?"

His lips twisted into a smile. He said, a ring of pride in his voice:

"It's no longer a secret. You've guessed the answer. John Harrison wanted me to keep the knowledge between us and Judge Plumn and a few others because he thought that later it could be put to useful advantage. Now that Seneca has found out, it's as though a great burden were lifted from my shoulders. At last I'm free to act." His smile broadened. "My mother was half-Indian, like you. I loved her greatly. The goal I am striving to reach is the natural goal of a man who is proud of his heritage."

THIS, then, was the answer. This was the reason for Jock St. Clair's intense interest in the work that John Harrison had started and which he wanted to see live and bear fruit. This was the explanation for his sacrifices, his risks.

She stared up at him and saw the proud look in his eyes. And she thought: "He's more white than Indian. He could be accepted as a white man, and yet he is proud of his Indian heritage."

A sense of shame filled her, but this was a different sort of shame. It was shame born of seeing herself in a true light.

"I want to help, Jock. I want to stay here and fight this thing with you."

He turned squarely to face her. "I hoped you'd say that. I dreamed of it. I prayed for it. There's so much to be done. So much that John Harrison started, and we must finish."

She said: "Seneca knows—about you?"

"He knows." A smile touched his lips. "Seneca is smart. He has ways of finding out things. He's ruthless. But he's a fool."

"He's powerful. He's demonstrated his contempt for Indians by burning your home. If that is allowed to go unpunished. . . ."

"It won't. Come, it's time for us to go."

They went outside and Jock brought up the horses and helped her into the saddle. The glow in the western sky had diminished to a pale, flickering light. . . .

Lyn saw with mingled wonder and surprise that at least two dozen horses were grouped outside Judge Plumn's house. The windows were brilliantly lighted, and at sound of their approach the door was flung open and Judge Plumn was framed in the rectangle of light.

"Jock?"

"Hello, Judge. I see everyone's here. Good work."

The round little man stepped outside. Other men appeared, and then Lyn saw the ample and welcome figure of Bertha Plumn. The girl slid from her saddle and went into the older woman's arms and found comfort there.

Men were milling around, asking questions, swearing softly at Jock's replies.

Someone said: "At the hide-out, eh? That's his first mistake. We can trap the whole caboodle of them there."

Someone spoke Lyn's name. She turned and found them staring at her, partly from curiosity, partly from wonder, but with complete respect.

Cliff January, a tall, gaunt man with beetling brows and the sharpest blue eyes Lyn had ever seen, stepped up to her and swept off his hat.

"Miss Lyn, I reckon we owe you a lot. But what you've done is no more'n we'd expect from the daughter of John Harrison."

The words, spoken in simple, straightforward honesty, gave a lift to her spirits. Behind January she heard the muttered endorsement of the other men for the words he had spoken, and suddenly she knew a pride of feeling for being who she was, knew only gratitude for the respect these men showed her.

SHE STOOD with Bertha Plumn near the doorway of the cottage and watched until the last sound of the retreating horsemen had died away. The older woman stirred, catching up a corner of her dress and dabbing at her eyes. "Ferd's such a reckless old fool. I—I'd hate for him to get hurt."

Lyn patted the big woman's shoulder. "He won't get hurt. I'm sure of it. This thing is well planned. I know."

Bertha Plumn gave the girl a quick, searching look. "Come inside. You've a wound on your face."

"No."

Bertha Plumn, half turned toward the door, paused and looked back over her shoulder.

Lyn said: "I'm going with them. It's my place to be with them."

"Girl, you're crazy. It's no place for you or any other girl to be. There'll be fighting."

"I know," said Lyn, and she moved off.

"No!" Bertha Plumn was frightened now. She ran out to where the girl was stepping into the saddle. "You mustn't go, Lyn. You mustn't."

Lyn's eyes were misty. "I'm sorry. I wish I could make you understand. Perhaps you might if our lives hadn't been so different. I can't explain. I—"

"Listen to me, Lyn." There was panic in Bertha Plumn's voice now, pleading in her eyes. "Jock St. Clair loves you. Doesn't that mean anything? He's good and fine and clean. He loves you. Isn't that important?"

"Loves me?" A tingling began to run along Lyn's spine. "What makes you say that? How do you know?"

"I know. I've seen a lot of life, Lyn. I've lived among men in a man's world, always. I've known Jock and loved him since he was a tot. He's never been able to keep anything from me."

The fluttering in Lyn's breast became the steady rapid beating of her heart. A warmth was stealing through her. She leaned down and kissed Bertha Plumn on her ample cheek, and the tears were in her eyes again.

"I believe you," she whispered. "Oh, I do believe you. Only now I know I must go. It's where I belong, beside Jock."

Bertha Plumn stared at the girl for a long moment. She said quietly: "Yes. Perhaps it's better that way. Wait here a moment."

She went into the house and returned carrying a small revolver. She pressed the gun into the girl's hand. "You might find use for this. Go now. Good luck and God bless you."

FOR TEN minutes Lyn rode hard. Presently she picked up the steady drumming of the cavalcade ahead, and slowed her pace, keeping this distance away.

She had no illusions about what would happen if Jock knew she was here. If what Bertha Plumn had told her was true, he would not for a moment tolerate this risk she was running. And this was where she wanted to be. Near Jock.

Ahead, silhouetted sharply against the sky, she saw a mountain peak, and presently became aware that it was toward this peak the cavalcade was riding. Their progress was slower now, more cautious. It occurred to Lyn that Seneca would more than likely have guards posted. Perhaps there would be an ambush, a trap. Terror seized her and gradually gave way to reasoning. These men were not fools enough to walk into a trap. This was the result of long months of planning.

The sound of the horses up ahead died. Lyn pulled up sharply. Her own mount's ears were pricked forward. She turned the animal into the deep shadows of some manzanita bushes and sat there waiting.

She found that her hands were growing stiff with cold and she thrust them into the pocket of her jacket, and touched the cold steel of the revolver that Bertha Plumn had given her. She took the weapon out, turning it in her hand, examining it as best she could in the pale light. She looked up from the gun and saw that a streak of light was tingeing the eastern horizon. She knew now why Jock and his men were waiting. Dawn would soon be here.

The flat distant slap of a rifle jerked her attention back to reality. The first was followed by a second and then a third and then a whole fusillade. Faintly she heard a wild yelling, and then the shooting developed into an intermittent roar. To the right the ground sloped sharply upward to the summit of a low ridge. Jack-pines and live-oaks grew here, offering excellent shelter.

Lyn reined her horse toward this summit. When still some twenty-five yards from the top she slid from her saddle and covered the remaining distance on foot.

For some unaccountable reason Lyn's heart began to pound. The sound of shooting was still sharp in her ears, and yet she heard, or fancied she heard, the sound of a horse cautiously coming up the trail from the direction of the battle.

She held her breath, listening, and then was sure she heard the sound of a shod hoof in soft earth. She leaped into the bushes and flattened herself on the ground.

A second passed and then another. And then a horseman heaved into sight. Lyn's heart stopped beating. The horseman was Skid Seneca. The animal that he rode, a big black, was blowing hard but making scarcely any noise as it picked its way along the trail.

Horse and rider stopped so close to where Lyn lay that she could have reached out and touched one of the animal's legs. Cold fear laid its hand over her heart when Seneca dis-

mounted and stared directly toward her hiding place. Then she realized he was trying to look back down into the valley.

Gradually the terror left her. Something strange and new and exciting was replacing it. In her hand she still clutched the revolver that Bertha Plumn had given her.

Skid Seneca led his horse a few paces away. Silently Lyn rose from her prone position. She held the gun in front of her and stepped out into the open.

"Get your hands up!"

She was prepared for astonishment from the man, but she was not prepared for any such reaction as she got. Seneca spun around with such suddenness that he tripped and fell and sat down heavily.

Lyn said: "Don't touch that gun! Get your hands up!"

SENECA'S mouth fell open. He blinked. He rubbed his eyes and blinked again. He said: "I'm seeing things. You ain't real."

"You'll discover how real I am if you don't do as I tell you and get your hands up."

Lyn's finger tightened on the trigger. Seneca was a broad target. He was less than ten feet away. She could not miss. And yet, to shoot a man in cold blood. . . .

A guttural sound came from Seneca's throat. At the same moment he leaped. She saw his body hurtling toward her—and she pulled the gun's trigger.

The revolver roared and flamed and leaped in her hand. She did not know whether the bullet had reached its mark or not. She felt Seneca's hand brush her shoulder, and she screamed.

She screamed and turned and fled off through the brush. She ran with all her strength, breaking through the shrubbery, crashing down the slope. A heavy step sounded behind her. She made a great lunge forward and fell, almost at the feet of the man who was behind the rock.

Someone cursed. She felt a heavy body stepping over her. A voice said: "Seneca! What a surprise!" Then the man laughed and she heard swift movement, the sound of something hard striking flesh.

She rolled over and brought up against a clump of bushes and sat up. Ten feet away in a little clearing two big men were standing up to each other exchanging fierce, smashing blows. One of the men was black-haired and slim, and he moved with the ease and grace of an Indian. It was Jock St. Clair. The other was Seneca, charging ahead, plowing his face straight into Jock's swinging fist.

The blow caught the redhead flush on the chin. His head snapped back and his knees buckled and for a moment he remained in this position, neither fully standing nor falling. His guard was down. He was openly and beautifully vulnerable.

Jock St. Clair smiled and stepped forward. His elbows came back and began driving forward like pistons. Lyn heard labored breathing and a throaty grunt, and then the dull crashing sound of a body falling full length to the ground. . . .

IT IS a matter of record that Skid Seneca and the five surviving members of his gang were given a fair trial, with Judge Plumn presiding. They were found guilty of murder and legally hanged. But that all happened thirty days later.

The evening of the morning following the now legendary fight, Jock St. Clair rode up to Judge Plumn's house and found Lyn Lucas sitting alone on the tiny front veranda.

Jock did not see Lyn until she spoke.

"Hello, Jock. I've been waiting. Where have you been?"

"At the railroad station."

"The railroad station. Why?"

"There were two trains out of here today. One in the morning and one in the afternoon. I wanted to be sure you weren't on them."

"Are you glad I wasn't?"

"Yes."

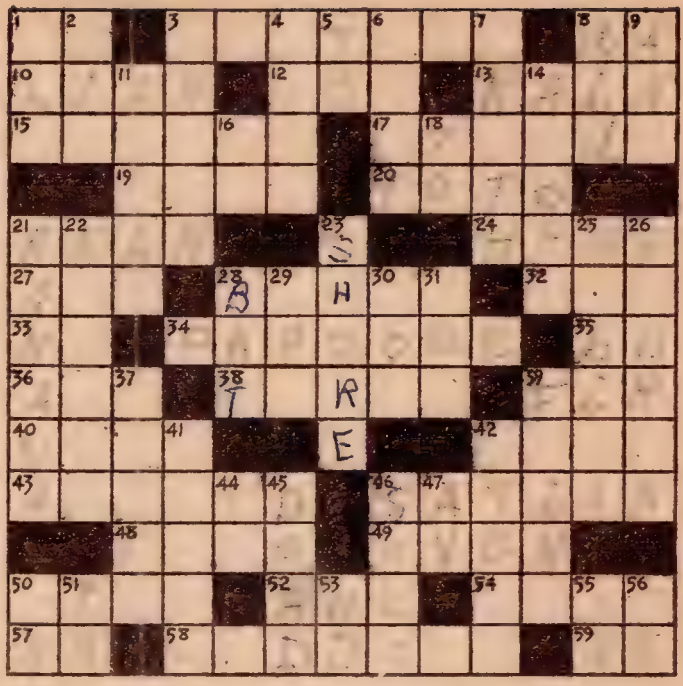
Silence again. Jock St. Clair cleared his throat. "Miss Lucas, there are some things I want to explain. There's a place in America for people like us. We've got to help keep that place for others that are coming along. There is opportunity, here in the West. I—"

It was a pretty speech, well begun. It seemed almost a pity to interrupt it. Yet Lyn cried with amused impatience: "Jock St. Clair, will you please stop lecturing me! My lands, we Indians can be human, can't we? We have feelings, haven't we?"

"Why—" began Jock St. Clair. "Why—" he gulped—"good gosh, I was only trying to —to say something that would make you feel better, that would make you want to stay."

"Try it again. Only this time, talk with your heart, not with the stern, cold methods that the white man has taught you. Speak with your heart, Jock. Ask me to stay."

THE WESTERNERS' Crossword Puzzle



The solution to this puzzle will appear in the next issue.

ACROSS

1. Suffix meaning "more"
3. A blouse worn in the 16th century
8. Day (Abbrev.)
10. One who tells untruths
12. To imitate
13. Falling drops of water
15. Consisting of leaves
17. Firm
19. To hurt
20. To carry
21. The crown of the head
24. An open-frame, stringed musical instrument
27. Exist
28. An inferior kind of tea
32. A meadow
33. A pronoun
34. An American Indian infant
35. South Dakota (Abbrev.)
36. A round cooking vessel
38. Small gull-like birds
39. A kind of pine
40. An exclamation of sorrow
42. Very wise
43. Devastated
46. Glossy, silk fabrics
48. The quality of a sound
49. A baking chamber
50. A detail
52. A pointed tool for making holes
54. A particle
57. New Hampshire (Abbrev.)
58. A small, enclosed pasture
59. Northeast (Abbrev.)

DOWN

1. A sprite
2. River (Spanish)
3. The value
4. Not common
5. Township (Abbrev.)
6. For fear that
7. Veracity
8. Accomplished
9. An
11. Winged
14. Pertaining to an area
16. An exclamation
18. Toward
21. An oblong, yellowish fruit of the Southern U.S.
22. The area between leaf veins
23. The seacoast
25. To yield
26. Priests
28. A small, black, flying mammal
29. To unclose
30. A long period of geological time
31. A dolt
37. To savor
39. Timorous
41. To put the foot down forcibly
42. A fine cut of beef for broiling
44. Half a printer's measure
45. Deceased
46. A song by one singer
47. Average (Abbrev.)
50. Within
51. Territory of Hawaii (Abbrev.)
53. War Department (Abbrev.)
55. Upon
56. A pronoun

Solution to First July Puzzle

WANTED, A COOK

By Stephen Payne

HE WANTED a cook, and she wanted a vet for her horse. What a beginning for a romance!

ENID heard firm steps on the hotel porch, where she was resting her saddle-weary muscles and enjoying the quiet of soft twilight. Without lifting her ash-blond head she asked perfunctorily, "The horses are all right, Jerry?"

"Not my name," said a deep voice, and a man's figure loomed beside her chair. For a moment he stood surveying her blond loveliness and her slender, supple figure in blue blouse and soft tan skirt with such marked approval it was quite flattering to the girl.

"I happen to be John Frank Jones," he went on, and a smile lighted up his rough-hewn dark face. "Folks call me John Frank to keep from confusin' me with all the other Joneses 'round here . . . . Don't look any farther for a job, Miss Martin. I'm needin' a ranch cook the worst way."

"A ranch cook?" Enid replied, shaken out of her usual poise. Her wide blue eyes took in the man's rusty working clothes, the giant bulk of him, and finally settled upon his rugged features. He had swept off a nondescript Stetson, and his jet black hair lay damp and crisp against his well formed head. Here stood

a big-framed, hard-muscled, rough-and-ready fellow and, oddly, he had caught her immediate interest.

"You ain't so solid nor yet so old as I'd expected," he said cheefully. "But that cuts no ice, if you can do a good job slingin' a skillet. Get your bags and I'll drive my wagon up here and we'll go."

Enid fairly gasped. "Go where?"

"To the old KY Ranch that I bought recently. It's gone to pot terrible, and I've got to build new fences and ditches and buildings. Have found plenty men to work, but no one to cook, man or woman, till you showed up, Miss Martin."

The girl sat up straight in her chair. "How'd you learn my name, John Frank?"

"From Lantern Ben, at the Spurtrack livery stable."

"Oh! What else did he tell you?"

"He said you drifted into Spurtrack this evening looking for work, and he reckoned a cookin' job'd hit you jus' right."

Enid felt an amused laugh start, and was instantly sorry, for she realized that if she laughed in his face this earnest young man would feel hurt.

He was going on, "Fourteen in my crew, Miss Martin, but none of 'em cowpunchers. If they were, they'd pitch in and help with the cookin' and other house chores. But these fellows are a different breed. So I have to do the grub-slingin' myself, when I should be bossin' all the different jobs. I warn you the buildings are badly shot, but it'll be a humdinger of a ranch once I get it goin'."

Enid leaned forward, all interest. Odd to realize that for the moment she was actually homesick for the old ranch where she'd been raised, homesick for the hard and almost comfortless life which she had believed she had now put behind her forever. Odd, too, how this big, serious fellow brought memories flooding back, and with those memories a momentary temptation to say, "What fun it'd be to help you build this ranch!"

But she must not yield to a sudden impulse, so she said slowly, "Aren't you making a mistake, John Frank?"

"Mistake?" For the first time, his features reflected uncertainty and doubt. "I'm afraid I don't quite get—"

"I'll say you're making a mistake!" a new voice cut in, and Enid Martin saw that her traveling companion, the man to whom she owed oh, so much, and the man who confidently expected she would marry him before long, had stepped out on the porch.

John Frank wheeled very swiftly for so big a man, and had his first look at Jerry Titus. White shirt adorned with a bought tie, striped trousers and fancy riding boots were in sharp contrast with the rough, serviceable clothes of the young ranchman.

In the moment which followed Enid felt the clash between them as a tangible force. Then Jerry Titus was saying curtly, "What's all this nonsense, anyhow?"

"Nothing for you to get sore about, stranger," said John Frank.

"Is that so?" the other shot back truculently. "To ask Enid Martin to take a job as a cook is almost insulting. Don't you know who she is, fellow?"

"I know what Lantern Ben told me."

"Did he tell you Miss Martin's the greatest trick and fancy girl rider of all time? She's a rodeo queen."

"Can't rodeo queens cook?" inquired John Frank innocently.

Enid started to speak, but Jerry Titus beat her to it. "That's not the point," he snapped. "The point is that Miss Martin can't and won't lower her dignity by—"

"Looks as if you're the bird who's sufferin' from an overdose of dignity," John Frank interrupted grimly. "Unless you've got some right to speak for the lady, go away back and sit down."

Jerry took two quick steps and drew himself up, bristling with belligerence. In one swift, graceful move Enid got to her feet and put herself between the two men. "No wrangling, boys. I'm sorry, John Frank, that I can't take the job. But you see, Jerry and I are on our way to the rodeo at Bannock and we're stopping here in Spurtrack only for tonight. You've heard of our wonder horse, Comet, haven't you?"

JOHN FRANK shook his black-haired head. "No'm. Reckon I've been too busy on the KY to pay any attention to rodeos. Sorry to have troubled you, Miss Martin," his dark face showing the dull red of embarrassment. "I should have guessed when I saw how young and pretty you were that old Lantern Ben was playing a trick on me! This time that foxy old scamp made me look like a fool for sure.... G'night."

The big fellow walked from the porch, and Enid stood watching him until he turned in at Lantern Ben's stable and vanished. Close be-

side her Jerry Titus said impatiently, "Stupid hayseed! If I hadn't stepped in just in time, what would you have told him, honey?"

Enid's reply was knife-edged. "I wouldn't have picked a fight with him as you did. Good night, Jerry."

In the privacy of her own room in the hotel, the girl admitted to herself that some deep emotional upset had prompted her to dismiss Jerry Titus so abruptly. This was ridiculous, of course, for John Frank Jones and his problem meant nothing to her. Nothing at all!

She must never forget how she owed her success as a trick and fancy rider to Jerry Titus. They had met at a small-town rodeo, and Titus had shown sympathetic interest in her ambition and a very lively interest in Enid herself.

The ranch-raised girl could ride well, and she had mastered a number of stunts, but the horse she was using at this time was simply hopeless, and though the small audience approved of the pretty rider, they boohed her clumsy nag unmercifully.

Enid had been feeling low and humiliated when Jerry Titus, handsome, blond, young and apparently very well-to-do, had approached her with a proposition: If she would accept him as her manager he'd furnish a wonder horse for her act. And at first sight of Comet, a beautiful pinto, Enid agreed to this proposal.

Comet proved to be a horse in a thousand, and from that day on Enid had been soaring like a rocket toward top rank in her dangerous and highly skilled profession.

Whenever she felt she'd had enough of this, Jerry had given her to understand that a life of ease and luxury and travel was hers if she'd say the word he confidently expected her to say.

The lure of the rodeo was now in her blood; she had come to love its thrill and excitement and glamour. Yet there was something this life had not given her, and tonight she was all at once dissatisfied.

Oh well, tomorrow she and Jerry would ride on toward Bannock, which was still a two-days' trip across the mountains. Spur-track town and the man who wanted to hire a cook would be forgotten forever.

Tomorrow became today, and after a silent breakfast, for Jerry was sulky and aloof, Enid and her manager walked to the livery stable, carrying small bags of clothing which were to be tied behind their saddles.

LANTERN Ben gave the girl a wise grin. "John Frank said I pulled a low-down trick on him. Hope you ain't mad with me, ma'am. And there's somethin' I hate to tell you. That pinto hoss is ailin' bad this mornin'."

Instantly Enid forgot the biting remarks she had planned to hurl at Lantern Ben. "You mean Comet is sick? Let me see him!"

The pinto was so listless and dejected that the horse didn't even recognize her. Lantern Ben reported that this morning Comet had refused to drink or to touch his oats. "Now I sorta savvy a simple case of colic, but I shore don't know what's haywire with this hoss, ma'am. You got some enemy as might want to stop you from makin' that Bannock rodeo?"

Enid whirled on the liveryman. "Where's your vet? Get him here, quick .... Enemies? Terry Oliver and his rider won't be happy to see us in Bannock. But they'd never do such a horrible thing as poison a horse!"

"Vet?" drawled Lantern Ben, scratching the stubble on his lean jaw. "Happens the ol' hoss doc we had died o' what they called acute alcoholism. Onliest feller hereabouts as savvies vet stuff is John Frank Jones."

"Jones!" rapped Jerry. "The same fellow who—Good Lord, Enid, after what happened last night, we don't want him."

The excited girl made an impatient gesture which dismissed Jerry. "Ben, how do I get to the KY. He'll be there, won't he?" She was backing Snip, her bay saddle pony, from his stall and bridling him swiftly.

"Reckon he will, ma'am. It's nine miles out and you goes—"

"Enid," Jerry cut in savagely, "we won't ask any favors of that hayseed. I'll dash to Bannock and bring back a real veterinarian."

"Dash along!" said Enid. "We may need one."

Ben was still giving directions and she nodded. "Yes, Ben, I can find the right place." Then, placing her right hand on Snip's withers, she sprang as lightly as a sparrow to his bare back.

The horse's hoofs made music on the floor as she raced out of the stable, and Snip had lathered and dried and was again all alathered when she careened down a sagebrush hill into the yard at the KY Ranch.

In the distance Enid saw a crew of men building fence, for the old fences were flat on the ground. Another crew was ditching, and the girl, who knew her ranches, observed that

this wide and fertile valley should cut a great crop of hay, once it was brought under irrigation. One man was doing chores, and outside of a woefully ramshackle log house the girl saw John Frank Jones, hatless, a flour sack tied around his waist, emptying dishwater.

SHE SKIDDED Snip to a stop, and above his noisy panting she called, "My trick horse is terribly sick and I'm afraid he'll die. Can you come?"

John Frank's dark eyes showed no great amazement. For a moment he surveyed Enid and her mount in silence, and then with sharp reproof in his tone he said, "And the nag you're ridin' is going to be sick mighty sudden. Shouldn't flog a horse on a full stomach."

"I know all that!" Enid retorted, "but I had to shove along fast. It's Comet's sickness that's making me nearly crazy. Can you come back with me now? You will come?"

He swabbed out the dishpan with a rag. "Is the horse sick or is this another of Lantern Ben's screwy jokes?" His lips were straight and unrelenting.

Enid's always hot temper spilled over. "No. Ben's not pulling anything now. I saw Comet myself."

"All right, Miss Martin." The man galvanized to action, and sent the dishpan sailing in through the house door. He ran to a nearby shed and climbed to the seat of a battered old truck equipped with a stock-hauling body. As he backed it out and turned it, he yelled to the choreman:

"Joe, come over here! Miss Martin, pile off that horse and climb in here with me."

"I must take Snip back to Spurtrack," she protested.

"Not right now . . . . Joe," to the man who had answered the call, "throw a blanket on that horse and lead him around to cool him off. Presently, let him have three swallows of water. Not more. Keep on exercisin' him, easy-like, for an hour or so. Got it?"

Joe mumbled, "I guess so, boss," and took hold of Snip's bridle reins.

"You know lots about horses, don't you, John Frank?" Enid exclaimed as she climbed up to the truck seat, and the machine roared out of the yard. The man hadn't stopped even to get his hat. Watching him, unobserved, she wondered would he have responded so quickly had he known Comet really belonged to Jerry Titus!

At two o'clock that afternoon, Enid found herself back on the KY Ranch. In Spurtrack, Lantern Ben had reported, "Titus lit out for Bannock. Said he'd be back soon as he could." John Frank had given treatment to the sick horse, and at the ranchman's suggestion Enid had agreed that they haul Comet out to the KY where the horse would get pure water and green grass.

As they drew into the ranchyard Enid noticed the ranch hands grouped at the bunkhouse. No one was doing any work; apparently no one was doing any cooking either. Impulsively she put a hand on John Frank's arm. "What does it mean?" she asked.

The man's face darkened with anger. He swung the heavy truck around close to the men, braked it and said, "Trouble, boys?"

A thick-set, red-headed individual answered insolently, "We come in to dinner. There wasn't none. No grub, no work. All of us is quittin'. Jus' waitin' of our dough."

ENID saw John Frank's big hands tighten on the steering wheel until his knuckles stood out white. "Quitting!" he ejaculated. "Fellows, you're putting me in an awful spot."

"Let me talk to them," Enid said quickly. "Men, I'm to blame because there was no dinner. You see, this pinto horse was deathly sick and—"

The redhead broke in sullenly, "Yah, Jones lets us men go hungry for a doggoned horse. Is that right, I ask you? Not as Mr. Jones can cook for sour apples. His grub'd gag a hog. All I got to say is write out our checks, feller."

"I'll write 'em out!" said John Frank grimly.

"No, no!" Enid protested. "Boys, I'll get the supper. If you still want to leave after that, okay."

Some of the rough crew grinned, and others openly guffawed. The redhead jeered, "From your looks, ma'am, I'd say the grub you throw together'll sure send us down the road."

Enid flushed and checked a barbed reply. Several of the men said they'd stick around. And Joe reported that Enid's saddle horse, Snip, was hunky and had been stalled in the big barn. "You want help to unload that classy pinto, boss?"

The boss's lips were a straight, tight line. Yet what he was thinking Enid could only guess, since he said nothing while Comet was taken from the truck and turned on green grass in a small pasture.

This done, John Frank took the girl to his house, where she found a surprisingly clean kitchen and an ample supply of food. But there was nothing cooked, and she had to begin a meal from scratch.

Watching her with frank admiration as she pitched in, the man said, "Most cowhands are tolerable cooks. But I hate it. That's maybe why I do such a poor job of it. . . . Anything you want me to do?"

"Get plenty of wood and water and set the table," she ordered, and found herself lighthearted, almost gay, as she bustled about. If only Comet would snap out of his strange illness she'd be completely happy.

FORTUNATELY she and Jerry Titus had allowed a couple of days' leeway in timing their arrival at Bannock. If they lost no more than two days they would still arrive in time for the rodeo.

Even the sullen redhead found no fault with the meal Enid put on the table, while many of the crew surreptitiously sent amazed and approving glances her way as she refilled platters, dishes and coffee cups.

When the last of them had clumped out, John Frank said, "Miss Martin, seems as if this dreary old house has brightened up all at once—the way spring brightens when the songbirds come north."

Feeling herself blushing under the intensity of his dark brown eyes, she answered earnestly, "After all you did for me, I'm happy to do what little I can for you."

In silence he stacked the dishes and washed them, avoiding any direct glances at her as he worked, which didn't exactly please Enid who, like all girls, loved to be admired.

"Penny for your thoughts?" she said laughingly.

"You won't be mad if I tell 'em, Enid?"

"Of course not."

He sighed. "I was thinking, 'Here's a girl who's tops in her profession, who's carved out a real career for herself, and while she can cook like nobody's business and would make a ranchman the best kind of wife—it just wouldn't be right even to suggest she give up the life she loves.' "

Enid thought, with racing pulses, "There's another factor he hasn't mentioned. It's that odd and mysterious and wonderful feeling a girl develops for some one certain man. It's love!"

He went on quietly, "Then too, there's Titus." He stopped and gave her a searching glance.

"Jerry?" she thought, her happiness clouded. "I'd forgotten him and all that I owe to him."

"You're coloring up like a mountain sunset," said John Frank. "Which means I guessed right. He's evidently the one and only in your life. . . . Let's go take care of the horse."

Together they put Comet in an old one-room cabin, fed him a bran mash and fresh, sweet-smelling hay, and bedded him down. The pinto seemed so much improved tonight that they agreed that perhaps tomorrow Enid could be on her way.

As the big-framed rancher and the slender, graceful girl walked in the gathering darkness, John Frank indicated to her the row of wooded foothills against somber mountains. "That will be my summer range when I'm able to get cattle," he explained. "There's a thousand acres in this old KY, and once I get the ditches built it'll cut five hundred tons of hay. Plenty good pasture, too. Not bad for a starter."

"It's wonderful," said Enid, her eyes glowing softly. She must not tell him she was falling in love with the place!

"Had my eye on it a long time. It was abandoned by a rich fellow who got sick of ranching. I finally saved a couple thousand dollars. Paid one thousand down on the ranch, plastering it to take care of the debt, which is only four thousand. I'm using my other thousand to get it organized. Suppose I can make a go of it, Enid?"

"I know you can!"

"But success won't amount to much unless I have somebody to share it," he said dreamily. "Somebody in particular, young and sweet and lovely, that a man could go all out for. You!"

BEFORE she could dodge, she was in his arms, and his lips came down to meet hers squarely. She struggled against his great strength for a moment, before she surrendered to the sheer ecstasy of such a kiss as she'd never known, never dreamed. Time and the stars stood still, and the glory and thrills of rodeos seemed of little worth in comparison. Jerry, too, had been eclipsed. Yet suddenly he was back in her thoughts, and she pushed herself away from John Frank Jones, crying softly:

"You shouldn't have done that! You shouldn't have done it!"

She fled to the old log house and to the room which had been assigned to her, and closed the door. She felt that all her thinking was mixed up and crazy. Undoubtedly crazy, because surely no girl in her senses would give up the life Enid had carved out for herself, and the life that lay ahead with Jerry—ease and comforts and luxuries—to share a ranchman's hard lot.

At five o'clock in the morning John Frank called her, and then said uncomfortably, "Hate to bring bad news, but your horse is worse again."

She became cold all over with dread. "Worse! Oh, John Frank, what's gone wrong?"

"Just what I'd like to know!" His voice sounded grim. "Well, I've done all I can for the present. . . ."

His steps moved toward the kitchen, and Enid heard him stuff the wood stove and then go outside.

Breakfast repeated the success of supper. John Frank put his crew to work and then put Comet out on green grass and confessed to Enid his concern about the horse. "This relapse wasn't due to Lantern Ben's alkali water, that's sure. Comet acts like he's been poisoned. Only thing we can do is to keep giving him as much of that medicine as he can stand and hope for the best," and he went off to work.

NOON had come and gone and Jones and his crew had enjoyed another of Enid Martin's meals when the arrival of Jerry Titus on a Spurtrack livery horse disconcerted the girl.

The job of cooking for this big crew was no soft snap, yet she had been humming a catchy tune as she worked, finding joy in the task and a strange contentment of spirit here on the quiet ranch. In a vague way she realized that something more important than her own ambition had entered her life. For the first time she had found that intangible something for which she had yearned, something which thrills and glory and applause had so dismally failed to provide.

Jerry's sudden appearance, however, stilled the song on her lips. It brought her up as sharply as a severe bit curbs a racing horse. Her first glance showed her that he was dusty and unshaven—and in a vile humor.

He did not answer her cheerful, "Hello, Jerry." Instead, after staring coldly and suspiciously at Comet lying down in the small pasture in the warm sun and at Snip grazing near by, he flung out of his saddle and grumbled:

"I rode to Bannock but couldn't get a vet to come back with me. When I hit Spurtrack, was I astounded to hear that you'd taken Comet out to Jones' ranch! Why? What does it mean, Enid? . . . See here," sniffing the savory odors of roasting beef and hot pies, "are you doing the cooking for the confounded quack?"

"That's right," said Enid quietly. "But he isn't a quack. Even though he doesn't have a veterinarian's license, he knows—"

"Has he cured Comet?" the man demanded.

"Yes and no. I'm sure Comet would have died if John Frank hadn't doctored him yesterday, and he seemed practically well last night. But this morning he was worse again. Acted as if he'd been doped or poisoned."

"Ahanh!" Suspicion flashed in Titus' sleep-hungry eyes. "Was bringing Comet to Jones' ranch his idea?"

"Come in and sit down and rest," Enid advised, holding a tight rein on her temper. "You're tired, and that makes you cross and unreasonable."

"Unreasonable!" the man flared out. "Young lady, if you'll put two and two together you'll see how that fellow is playing you for a sucker and playing us both the nastiest kind of a trick. . . . Steady! No fireworks. Wait till I explain."

The explanation was terse and wrathful. John Frank Jones had been obsessed with the idea of hiring a cook. When Jerry had told him off in town, Jones had taken an instant dislike to him. Figuring out a despicable scheme to get even, he had sneaked into the livery stable and had doped Comet. Because he was the only man in the vicinity with veterinary knowledge, he knew that in all probability he'd be called in to treat the prized horse.

HIS NEXT step was to get both the horse and Enid to his ranch in the hope she would cook for him. When this had worked out to his advantage, he had again doped Comet in order to keep Enid on his ranch.

Anger brought red flags to stain Enid's cheeks. "I never dreamed you, or anyone else,

could hold such ugly suspicions!" she declared. "Even if he had a real motive, John Frank is not the sort of a man who'd—"

A mirthless, satirical laugh interrupted her. "Listen, are you game to stand guard with me tonight? Or are you afraid that we'll catch your precious John Frank doping Comet once more?"

"I'm not one bit afraid we'll catch John Frank bent on any mischief," the girl replied. "But I do think it's a good idea to ride close herd on Comet. Suppose you leave now, and after dark I'll meet you at the edge of the willows and then we'll see what we'll see."

"It's a go," agreed Jerry. "The horse must get well, for we mustn't lose out on that Bannock rodeo. In Bannock I saw Terry Oliver and his crack girl rider, which means we've got tough competition in the events. Not as tough as if Vera Johnstone was riding. You remember her, of course."

Enid nodded. Vera was tops as a trick and fancy rider. She asked, "Why isn't she riding at Bannock?"

"Same trouble you once had," Jerry informed. "No good horse for her act. Sorry I was cross, but I'm all worked up. See you later, my dear!"

Enid was silent and unhappy as she put supper on for the crew that night. She was even more silent after the meal, and went to her room as soon as the dishes were washed. John Frank had watched her with deep concern in his fine dark eyes, realizing something was troubling her and thinking it was because she was worried sick about the pinto.

It was after the lights were all out and the ranch had become as still as the open prairie on a windless day that the girl silently left the house and, armed with a flashlight torch, hurried to the willows. Here she found Jerry Titus waiting for her, and they at once stationed themselves at one corner of the small stable which housed Comet for the night.

To the tense and worried girl, whose most haunting fear was that Jerry's ugly suspicion might prove correct, it seemed that hours had passed before a human figure materialized close to the building.

AS THE fellow stealthily advanced to the door, Enid observed with a sickening shock what a big-framed man he was. Halting a moment to look and listen, he opened the door, which was fastened only with a hasp, and entered the stall.

Light had sprung up inside the stall. As Jerry darted to the door, Enid heard the rustle of steps in the hay on which Comet was bedded. This was followed by the horse's soft nicker, and then she heard Jerry shout:

"Come out of there, you weasel!"

Scarcely had the command been uttered when the light was switched off and like a wild horse leaving a chute a huge shape charged out of the building. Striking Jerry head on, the man smashed him to the ground, and then pounced on him.

Springing forward, Enid switched on her flashlight. As its beam picked out the two writhing in combat, she caught the gleam of a knife in the raised hand of Jerry's adversary.

But at the very instant in which the knife was plunging downward, another figure bounded around the farther corner of the building and a well aimed boot crashed into the would-be killer's face. The blow thus diverted, the knife buried itself in the ground.

Enid's dancing torchlight revealed the newcomer to be none other than John Frank Jones, his dark face grimly savage. In the next sliced second, he and the other big-framed man were slugging one another. Suddenly, the other man whirled and sprinted toward the willows, with John Frank on his heels like wolf after colt. John Frank's right outreaching hand caught the man by one shoulder and spun him around; his left landed a blow to the chin which popped like a shot.

A moment later, John Frank, dragging his senseless foe, returned to the area in front of the small building lighted by Enid's flashlight.

Jerry Titus sat up dazedly. "Hello, Jones," he gasped. "Looks like you had the same idea we did. And you saved my bacon."

"Know this coyote?" panted John Frank.

Enid played her torch on the fellow's battered face, and Jerry cried, "Why—why, it's Syd Bowles! He works for Terry Oliver .... Enid, that explains how Comet got sick and stayed sick. I'd never've believed Oliver was underhanded enough for that."

"It kills your ugly suspicion of John Frank!" Enid felt like adding. But there was no sense in letting the ranchman know about Jerry's suspicions.

Apparently curious about all the to-do, Comet thrust his head and neck out the open door, and snorted, as if he was feeling almost normal once again. With an exclamation of joy, Enid rubbed the pony's ears fondly, and John Frank Jones bent to search Bowles.

"Eumphm!" he said tautly. "Here's a hypodermic syringe. Full of dope, no doubt! But the cur didn't get to use it tonight."

JERRY Titus said slowly, "I—er—um—I'm grateful to you, Jones, for saving the horse; more grateful for what you just did. If Comet's able to travel, Enid and I'll drift along to Bannock. Got to make that rodeo, you see. We'll take Bowles with us, turn him over to the sheriff."

John Frank Jones shrugged his big shoulders. "I savvy," he said. "You two have got to make that rodeo. But it'll be a heap easier on Comet if you haul him in my truck."

"Mighty white of you, Jones," said Jerry, and he came close to the girl, taking one of her hands in his. "That suit you, Enid?"

John Frank had found a rope and was now tying Bowles' wrists and ankles. His back was toward Enid as she heard herself say, "No, Jerry. You can take Comet and your saddle horse to Bannock, but I'm staying on the KY to take a job John Frank's offered me."

"Enid! What are you saying?" Jerry's eyes were as wide as an owl's in the starlight. "You'll give up your career to—to—"

Enid interrupted, "You can easily pick up another girl rider, I'm sure. Vera Johnstone, for instance. Don't look so amazed, Jerry. I'm not really giving up anything, because," a lift sweeping into her words, "here I have found— Oh, here he comes."

John Frank's big figure moved toward the two, and Jerry, with a bow to the girl, stepped aside. "I'll get my saddle horse," he announced, and walked toward the willows. Over his shoulder he added, "Jones, up until five or ten minutes ago I didn't like you a little bit. But now I'm wishing you luck."

"What's he mean?" asked John Frank, raising his left hand to rub Comet's muzzle.

Enid turned off her flashlight and tipped back her ash-blond head to look up into the man's eyes. "Can't you guess?" she whispered softly.

And John Frank Jones instantly proved to her complete satisfaction that he was a very good and a very accurate guesser.

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. The following pioneer ranchmen, well known throughout the West, can be grouped together as having what in common: Murdo Mackenzie, Jack Culley, John G. Adair, John Molesworth, William French?

2. The druggist knows it as *canabis indica*. Other names for it are hasheesh, bhang and Indian hemp. By what name of southwestern Spanish origin is it known in the U.S.?

3. What predatory wild animal is most numerous throughout the Western range country?

4. Oklarado, Texico and Texarkana lie on or near the borders between what pairs of states?

5. A well trained cowpony is "ground-hitched" by dropping his bridle reins to the ground. Should the ends of the reins be tied or open?

6. A Western lumberjack would know which one of the following tree names is a stray in this grouping, and why: Douglas fir, yellow spruce, Oregon pine, red spruce and yellow pine.

7. In a cattle roundup, what would you put in a jockey box?

8. Are mountain lions ever spotted?

9. Name three Western states in each of which there is an area called "The Panhandle," because of its shape on the map.

10. In the plains country what is called "a 'fraid hole"?

You will find the answers to these questions on page 92. **Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total score is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.**

CANDY MOUNTAIN

By Austin Corcoran

HE'D NEVER seen a girl like her, but he knew right away she was the girl for him and nothing they said could change his mind.

WADE HARPER wakened that morning with a deeply exciting sense of freedom. He remembered nothing like it in his slightly more than twenty years of age. This was the first time Aunt Belle and Uncle Asa had both been away from the ranch, but it had taken several days for their dominance to evaporate from the atmosphere. Conscience reminded him that they were swell folks. Hadn't brought him to their home in his orphaned infancy and treated him like an own son? That was why, when he followed an impulse against their will, he'd always felt guilty. That was why this independence was intoxicating.

He sang lustily as he rode from the corral into what seemed like a new world. Yet nothing unusual occurred until past noon, when he dropped over into the creek bottom and heard a girl's voice call imperatively, "Hello-o-o! Hel-lo-o-o!"

As he spied her, his suddenly tightened grip of the reins halted his horse. Where the stream widened to form a deep pool she stood

on a rock, outlined startlingly against the green of cottonwood trees. Her one garment was a bright orange bathing suit, its short, flaring skirt a mere frill around her slender waist.

It hadn't seemed an especially hot day, yet something like heat waves shimmered between the girl and himself. He noted details of her appearance in dizzying flashes. Black curls were a silky veil over shoulders that appeared ivory white in contrast. Her small feet were white against the rock. Her ankles were slender, the knees plump—maybe had dimples. A smile curved cherry red lips and her surprisingly blue eyes held sparkling lights.

"My but I was glad when I heard you singing and knew somebody was coming!" she exclaimed. "I was positively panicked when I found my horse was gone, and my clothes."

"Gone?" Wade repeated with a bewildered glance up and down the shallow canyon.

"While I was swimming," she replied. "I hung my stuff over the saddle horn, I was afraid there'd be bugs or ants on the bushes. My horse was tied to that tree." She pointed to a cottonwood a few yards distant. "My boots are there but it would be dreadful to have to walk to the ranch like this." She indicated her bare legs below the abbreviated bathing suit. "The brush is terribly scratchy."

"It sure is," Wade agreed, noting that dimples were where he had imagined they might be, then glancing quickly away from her knees. "What ranch are you from?"

"The Rocking A. I'm spending my summer vacation there."

That accounted for it. She was a stranger in the country. Wade had never seen a girl dressed in this manner save in the movies or between the covers of a magazine.

"Quite a ways to the Rocking A, ten miles across country," he told her. "S'pose I take you to our place—it isn't more'n four miles—get you a dress to wear and drive you home?"

"That'll be fine," she replied. "I'm Virginia Bruce, from New York." She seemed to think he might recognize the name. It did suggest something but Wade couldn't grasp the connection.

Introducing himself, he stepped from the saddle and brought the small, fancily stitched boots to the rock, where she sat to put them on. Wade watched in a trance while she took white socks from the boots and drew them deftly over the pink-toed little feet. When she finally glanced up, he fixed his gaze quickly on the black he was holding by the reins. "You didn't tie your horse good enough," he said. "Hafta look out for that. Now, if you're ready, I'll put you in the saddle and walk alongside."

"No," she objected. "You get in the saddle and I'll perch behind. I've always wanted to ride like that."

Wade wasn't too hard to convince. And he disregarded the risk of being spied by some cowpuncher who would give him a good ribbing for a ride that was certainly unique on that range.

Virginia Bruce was gay and friendly. She coaxed him to repeat the song he had been singing when he came over the ridge. He regretted their approach to the ranch. Then he thought, "I can make the kitchen fire quick, while she's putting on something of Aunt Belle's. Then we'll eat lunch." A fellow could surely have a swell time when he was in a position to do what he pleased. He suppressed a shiver as he pictured himself bringing Virginia within the range of his aunt's vision.

While she helped him unsaddle at the corral in the rear of the ranch house, Wade remembered the breakfast dishes he had left unwashed in his mood of revolt against restrictions. "We'll go in the front way," he said when they turned from the enclosure.

As she moved at his side across the yard she seized his hand and swung it back and forth between them in the rhythm of the song she started singing: "One evening as the sun went down, and the jungle fires were burning. . . ." His baritone joined her soprano, an occasional trill of laughter breaking into the song. "Down the track a hobo came a-hiking, and he said, 'Boys I am not 'journing. . . . I'm headed for a land that's far away, beside the crystal fountain.'" The little boots pranced beside Wade's larger ones as they rounded the corner of the house, their voices gayer and louder as they sang, "So, come with me and you shall see the Big Rock Candy Mountain.'"

There fell a sudden hush, startled silence. First Wade saw the dusty Ford car before the steps, then Mrs. Madden in the center of the porch. He'd never considered her a large woman, but now she loomed amazingly. He felt small, standing in the yard below.

Lena was at her mother's shoulder, her pale eyes opened widely to stare from Virginia to Wade.

"W-well, this is a surprise," he stammered, trying to smile with a face that felt as stiff as a tin mask.

"Yes, it is," Mrs. Madden agreed, her words like bits of ice. She ignored the girl at Wade's side. "I promised your Aunt Belle," she went on, "that I'd come up whenever I could, while she's away. She was worried about your bein' here alone." The gleam in Mrs. Madden's eye proclaimed that she believed her friend had sound reason for worry. "I brought you some baked beans an' pie an' some crullers," she concluded.

"Thanks, that was awfully good of you," Wade said. "Come on in and sit down." He introduced his companion. And again he caught her look that seemed to expect recognition.

Mrs. Madden's expression remained unchanged as she bowed slightly.

"My horse ran away with my clothes while I was swimming in the creek," Virginia laughed. "Wasn't I lucky to be rescued? I didn't know what I was going to do, and I couldn't stay there all day."

"I brought her over here to get something of Aunt Belle's to wear, then I'll drive her to the Rocking A where she's boarding," Wade put in, wondering how a fellow's face could burn like fire while his spine felt like an icicle as his did.

"You won't have to leave your work to go way over there," Mrs. Madden said. "I'll drive Miss Bruce as soon as she—er—dresses." Her glance fell to the orange trifle of a garment with distinct aversion. "Where are you from?" she asked. "New York? My but you're a long way from home!"

"I wanted a complete change," Virginia said pleasantly, "where you could get away from everybody who knows you and sort of lose your identity."

"Heavenly day! You mean pretend you're somebody else?" Mrs. Madden exclaimed, suspicion dawning in her eyes. "What do you work at?"

"I've done different things," Virginia replied, somehow managing a nice girlish dignity as she faced the older woman's probing stare.

Wade broke in to point out Aunt Belle's room. "I guess you can find something," he said, "even if it is too big."

WHEN Virginia closed a door at the rear of the living room, Mrs. Madden burst into voluble exclamations. "Must be some pretty big reason why a girl wants to run away from everybody that knows her! And did you ever see anything like her impudence? Looked at me as if, why—almost as if she didn't see me! She's done something she hadn't ought to, be sure of that, Wade Harper! She came here to hide!"

He glanced uncomfortably at the closed door. "She didn't say she had run away," he objected. "I don't believe she is afraid of anything, or hiding. She's just tired of what she's been doing, wants to have a change. Forget everything that's bothered her and have things all different. I've felt that way myself."

"You? What would you want different?" Mrs. Madden demanded indignantly. "You've got a fine home. Your uncle's paid you wages since you was fourteen. You're buildin' up a nice bunch of cattle for yourself, got everything comin' your way."

"I didn't mean that. Of course I've got everything fine," Wade declared in haste, wishing heartily that he'd kept still. Lena's intent look made him uneasy. He'd guessed for a long time what Aunt Belle had in her mind concerning himself and Lena Madden. He was afraid Lena's thoughts had followed the same line. The possibility made him panicky. Not that she could do anything about it, but it made a fellow darned uncomfortable to have to be sidestepping women who were hell-bent on something. Good women, who'd rather cut off their hands than do anything wrong, but they set their minds on the wrong ideas. Facing Mrs. Madden, and Lena who was a pale copy of her mother, Wade felt smothered. They were ganging up on Virginia Bruce because of him, he was sure of it, and that wasn't fair. This was a time to demonstrate that new independence.

"She does talk queer," Lena was saying, "and there is something queer about her. Pa sent Dil Gates over to the Rocking A on an errand and Mrs. Newton told him they'd got a girl boarder all the way from New York. She was curious about her because she's alone and don't tell a thing about herself."

As Wade parted his lips to speak, Virginia opened the door and appeared on the threshold. "Not so bad," she laughed, drawing the belt about her slim waist a notch tighter, to

hold more firmly the ample folds of an old house dress of Aunt Belle's. Not even the faded purple flowers and the crooked collar could detract from Virginia's charm.

"It isn't only because she's pretty," Wade thought, "she's so friendly and nice."

"Well, I guess we're ready," Mrs. Madden said, turning to the door.

"Guess we are," Wade agreed nonchalantly. "I'll just step to the shed and get the car."

"But I'm going to take Miss Bruce—" Mrs. Madden began.

"Nice of you to offer," Wade replied, "but when I say I'll take a lady home, I keep my promise." His tone and expression cut off argument.

When they were driving along the road, he said, "I was going to get us some lunch, but I knew they'd stick around till we left."

"Your friends didn't like me," Virginia said with a seriousness that contrasted with her usual gayety. "I'm sorry. I hope I haven't caused any unpleasantness for you."

"None a-tall. They're just neighbors—don't count," Wade assured her, more emphatically because he was recalling the look in Mrs. Madden's eyes, the sort that usually boded trouble for somebody. He'd seen that little flame of zeal kindled before, and you never knew how far the fire would spread.

THEY did not regain their former gaiety but they dropped into friendly talk, discovering many similar tastes though Virginia declared she knew nothing about the West and very little about country life any place.

"But I love to ride, to do anything out of doors," she said. "When things clear up—I mean when I make my stake, I'll never live in town again." There was wistfulness in her eyes and something of strain around her mouth as she spoke.

Wade guessed that she'd been on her own for some time and that life had been none too easy. "You're staying at the Rocking A all summer?" he asked.

"I planned to," she told him, "but I might get word that I'd have to leave suddenly."

"Hope not!" Wade declared with fervor. "And—I'll see you again?"

"If you want to," she replied with a simplicity he liked immensely.

When they drove into the ranchyard a number of the boarders were gathered on the porch and steps. He saw no other girls, nobody who looked like a companion for Virginia. "I'll pull up to the side door," he said, "then you can duck inside without being seen."

She laughed, the happy trill that sounded like music. "You'd make a grand conspirator!" she exclaimed.

"At your service any time," Wade declared, "and I've found it's a swell idea to dodge explanations."

Nodding and laughing, she vanished through the doorway.

The next couple of days were unbearably dull. Then Wade encountered Dil Gates looking for stray cattle from the Madden outfit. "I hear you seen the New York girl that's over to the Rocking A," the cowpuncher greeted him. "Pretty, ain't she?"

"I'd say so," Wade replied guardedly, not willing to enter into a discussion of Virginia.

Dil was given to idle gossip and it was disquieting to know that his attention had been drawn to Virginia Bruce. "Mis' Newton says they ain't had nobody like her in the three years they've took boarders," Dil went on. "When she isn't outdoors she shuts herself up in her room a lot. And she gets telegrams that's only signed with initials, worded funny, too, sort of mysterious, and don't make much sense."

"How does Mrs. Newton know that?" Wade asked, scowling.

"Oh, they lay around in the girl's room, I guess," was the vague reply. "And she's got a big metal suitcase with two locks an' a padlock, always fastened tighter'n hell, and—"

"I should think everything she's got would be locked up," Wade broke in, "with folks snooping like that."

"'Tain't snoopin' to be curious about folks that act mysterious," Dil argued. "And it's like Mis' Madden says, a community had ought to keep an eye on what kind of folks comes into it."

"Damn it, what harm can a little girl like that do?" Wade exclaimed angrily.

"You never can tell who she might be mixed up with," Dil said, "especially since she come from a big city. Of course she's purty and fascinating, but that don't mean nothin'. They say Cleopatra was, and I guess she made a lotta trouble."

"Forget it, Dil, you don't know what you're talking about," Wade said curtly, kicking his horse into a lope that left the other cowpuncher far behind.

GATES was always babbling about something, but Wade didn't like Virginia to be the object of his talk. Not that he believed there was anything strange about the girl. She had natural reserve and didn't discuss her affairs with all and sundry. But he guessed nobody could do anything more than talk and they'd tire of that by and by.

There was nothing surreptitious about Wade's methods. Early Sunday he drove to the Rocking A to see Virginia. She suggested a ride and he saddled a couple of horses. Everything he did with her seemed to be fun and she was just as gay when they were caught in a summer shower, laughing as she brushed the raindrops from her face and tossed back her damp curls. When the sun came out she showed him how quickly her blouse dried. "Doesn't it look nice?" she asked, riding close for his inspection.

"You always look nice," he replied with a fervor that brought a startled expression to her eyes.

But she said lightly, "If you think so, sing me that song I like."

When he had finished she said dreamily, "I guess the big Rock Candy Mountain is any place you want terribly to be, where you think it's lovely."

"I guess so," he agreed.

Then they were in the ranchyard and a few moments later he was headed for home. On the way he realized that he knew very little more about Virginia Bruce. She was an orphan, had always lived in the East and earned her own living since she was seventeen. That summed up his knowledge.

Joe Madden hailed him as he was passing their place. "Guess you forgot you was s'posed to eat Sunday dinners here while Ase 'n' Belle's away," he said. "The women folks was all of a dither when you didn't show up around noon. C'm'on in now and have supper."

Afterwards Wade was glad he did. He liked Joe and knew he was a balance wheel for his wife. And Joe was no gossip. He wouldn't encourage Dil Gates' talk. No reference was made to Virginia by either Mrs. Madden or her daughter, and Wade was inclined to think they had cooled down.

This opinion remained undisturbed until the day after his aunt and uncle came home. Meanwhile he had seen Virginia a couple of times, once a brief encounter in town and once for a second Sunday ride that had been somewhat spoiled by the breaking in on their privacy by other boarders at the ranch.

When Wade came in for supper he knew Aunt Belle was excited.

"Why didn't you tell me about that girl you loaned my dress too?" she asked.

"Nothing to tell," he answered.

"I'd think there was plenty," Belle Parker declared, "when she's here to hide from something, said by words from her own mouth."

Wade tried vainly to explain.

"I don't see any difference," she insisted, "you're just twisting words. And it makes me feel awful, Wade dear, to think she's got such an influence over you, to have you stand up for her so."

"Now, Belle, take it easy," Asa advised. "Wade ain't takin' up especially for her. He's got too much sense."

"I do insist that she's all right," Wade asserted boldly. "And such talk makes me plumb mad!"

"Take it easy, boy," Asa said. "There's usually fire with a lotta smoke. And your aunt got upset thinkin' how much you've been seein' of this girl. She ain't our kind, not the sort of girl you could bring here to live. A city girl, mixed into some kind of undercover affairs—it wouldn't do, my boy."

"Bring her here!" Wade exclaimed. "It's no question of that. In fact, now that we're talking about it, I wouldn't marry and take my wife any place but my own home."

"This is your home!" Belle exclaimed tearfully.

"Not in that sense," Wade compelled himself to speak gently. "I've done a lot of thinking while I was alone, and decided to take over that range Orrin Drake homesteaded. A man should have his own outfit, even if he starts small. And I'll always be around to give you a hand, Uncle Asa."

"It's that girl. She's made all this trouble," Belle wailed.

"I'd decided that before I saw her," Wade declared with unmistakable honesty.

"Well, let it go now, you'll feel differently when you think it over some more, what it would mean to us to have you leave here," Belle said, wiping her eyes and smiling up at him.

WADE set his jaw but remained silent. He couldn't be coaxed over this time. He knew he was right and never again would he yield his independence of action and thought.

"And you won't want to see that girl again when you find out about her," Belle persisted. "She's the only boarder that's got a radio of her own. She keeps it in her room and only turns it on low, with the door tight shut. But next door to her they noticed that she gets queer programs, nothing that's popular. And the one she gets every night is that where they finish telling the names of people wanted by the F.B.I. and other law officers. She never misses that. One night she ran upstairs to get it, when supper was late. Left the table."

"That doesn't mean a thing, Aunt Belle," Wade protested.

"Wait!" she commanded him excitedly. "Lena Madden and her mother began watching that program. Three days ago they got something. There's a young woman wanted for defrauding the mails and blackmailing. She was with some others, but part of 'em was caught. She got away with a lot of blackmailin' stuff. Her description fits Virginia Bruce. And anybody that thinks they know her whereabouts was to notify certain officers."

"Well?" Wade's lips were taut and white as they emitted the one syllable.

"Sophia Madden sent a letter notifyin' em!" Belle declared impressively.

"What!" Wade shouted. "She dared do a thing like that?"

"Take it easy, boy!" Asa Harper said sharply. "If she's innocent, it won't do her no harm. Then F.B.I. fellers and big detectives handle things pretty slick. There's a little more Belle didn't tell you. The Bruce girl got a telegram yesterday. It said, 'Blacky on way there. Sit tight and don't give him the stuff.' Just initials was signed."

"I think this is horrible," Wade said grimly. "If there was a man mixed up in it, I'd give him the beating of his life." Grabbing his hat, he started for the door.

"Where you goin'?" Belle cried.

"To tell Virginia," he replied.

"Give her warning so she can get away! Stop him, Asa!"

"She won't run away," Wade said scornfully, "but she'll have a friend to stand by her!"

He flung himself through the doorway and strode around the house to the car parked in a shed. Anger kept him from thinking very clearly, but it seemed an incredible situation. It had grown from such trifling incidents. Even now he could scarcely believe that the foolish imaginings of one woman could have brought about such a result.

Wade drove fast. Supper wasn't long over when he arrived at the Rocking A Ranch. The boarders were gathered on the porch watching for the moon to rise. Virginia ran down the steps and into the yard to meet him.

"Oh, Wade, I'm glad you came along!" she exclaimed in a shaky voice.

"What is it?" he asked anxiously. "What's wrong?"

"I don't really know, and I'm so nervous," she replied, her fingers clasping his arm tightly. "You know I told you I might have to leave here suddenly maybe it'll be quicker than I thought. I'll know awfully soon. Something's happened that bothers me. Can't we go for a drive, where I can talk to you without so many people around?"

"Sure. I was going to suggest that," he agreed.

"Take the car around by that side door, where you let me out that time, and wait for me a minute," she said hurriedly. "There's a radio program I must hear and I want to get something from my room. I'll only be a minute."

"Okay," Wade told her. "And take it slow, I've got plenty of time to wait."

WHEN she left him Wade still felt the tension under which she seemed to be struggling. Something had upset her terribly. What did she want to hear over the radio? And did she have any inkling of what he was about to tell her? What was that she said about maybe having to leave? As questions pelted his mind, Wade's anxiety increased. He drove quickly around to the shadowed side doorway but he was too impatient to sit in the car. Opening the screen door quietly, he entered the dimly lighted hall. Beyond the archway into the living room a radio was playing, barely audible above the clamor of voices on the porch. And Wade caught no definite words until the end of an announcement. Then they struck like hammer blows on his ear drums.

"Virginia Bruce," the voice came from the wires. "Don't forget that name, radio listeners, it's Virginia Bruce."

Wade stood as if stunned while the radio droned something about the Blue Network. His tongue stiffened in his mouth as he

asked himself what had been said before her name was given.

"Is that you, Wade?" Her voice came softly from the stairway. "Will you help me?"

His legs moved woodenly as he went towards her. She had halted at the bottom step and there was something bulky in the shadows at her side.

"It's heavier than I thought. Will you carry it to the car?" she asked.

Reaching down, he touched a metal suitcase. "Virginia, what is it?" he demanded under his breath. "Why are you taking this out with you?"

"Maybe it's silly," she replied, again in that strange, shaky voice, "but I wouldn't feel easy leaving it behind. Someone tried to break into it while I was riding this afternoon. I haven't the least idea who. But you see, there's something in there that might mean a lot of money to me. I wish we could hide it safely some place outside this house."

Wade didn't know what he thought. Nothing that made sense. She was so close to him in the dim hallway that he caught the perfume of her hair, felt the warmth of her breath on his cheek. And he knew how dear she was to him. Virginia just had to be all right. He couldn't believe she was anything else.

"Okay, come on," he said huskily, lifting the suitcase and striding softly toward the doorway.

When they were alone, out in the light of the rising moon, he would tell her the things he had come to speak. And she would explain. The suitcase made no difference to the main issue.

Virgina went ahead down the shallow steps to the side of the car. Neither of them had noticed an extra stir at the front of the house. When she opened the car door for Wade to slide in the suitcase, the sharp command from the shadows along the house wall at their right was a distinct shock.

"Hold it, fellow!" a hard voice directed, as a square-shouldered, thick-set man stepped into view. Extending a hand quickly, he set the suitcase on the ground at his side.

At the same time another man came out on the steps and they could hear a stir in the hall behind him. Then a bright light went on over the doorway, revealing Virginia standing with tightly clasped hands, her glance darting from one to the other of the two stranger.

"My credentials," the square-shouldered man said, drawing a leather case from his pocket and presenting it to Virginia and Wade in turn. "You're the girl that calls herself Virginia Bruce?" he asked.

"I *am* Virginia Bruce," she declared, meeting his gaze with steady eyes.

He shrugged. "What's in that case?" he asked curtly.

"Personal possessions," she replied.

"That you were trying mighty hard to slip out of the house," he told her sharply. "Give me the keys and we'll see."

"I object to orders like that," she said, still eyeing him steadily.

A GASP and smothered exclamations came from the hallway. Wade knew that the occupants of the porch had crowded in there to watch and listen. He clenched his hands into hard fists, wishing fervently that he could punch the two officers on the noses.

"Sorry it has to be this way," the hard voice apologized with a shading respect, "but we're giving the orders and you have to take 'em. Do I get the keys?"

For reply, Virginia opened her handbag and silently drew out a small ring of keys. Stooping, she fitted one in each of the three locks and turned them, more than a hint of defiance in her quiet manner. Then she stood erect, a scornful lift breaking the perfect curve of her red lips.

The square-shouldered man flung back the lid and a very rainbow of color was revealed in the tightly packed case. There were garments in bright fabric of every known hue. He ran his hands expertly amongst them, cascading them over the edge, revealing girlish slacks and blouses, play suits with fascinating frilly skirts, bathing suits, gay neckerchiefs. Virginia's clothing! Wade boiled as the seeking hands stirred them about.

"No papers nor pictures," he grunted, glancing up at his companion officer. "What were you sneaking this stuff out for?" he demanded, getting to his feet and staring hard at Virginia.

"Because somebody tried to break into the suitcase this afternoon. And I had reason to believe it was a rival designer who wanted to get a line on my new ideas for sports models in girls' and women's clothing. I've developed a process to bring about quick drying without rainspots showing, that makes

things look as if they were freshly laundered," she explained with a rapid, scornful flow of words.

"I'll be damned!" The second officer exclaimed under his breath.

"Your broadcast over the radio a couple of times a week for a long time stopped about a month ago," his superior said.

"It did," she said with the dignity that so delighted Wade. "Now will you please tell me what this is all about? Why I am hounded and treated like an escaped criminal?"

He complied with an explanation that embodied about what Wade already knew. "Sorry, miss," he said with genuine regret now evident in his voice and manner. "We have to investigate tips like that. And we're sure the young woman we want came West. Thought she *might* be masquerading as you. But you're too young, that's plain."

The voices inside the hall rose to a babble.

"Wait!" she called. "Don't be in a hurry. You might as well *know all.*" She emphasized the final words mischievously. "The wires were from a friend who helps me with my business, just tips about the two firms who are dickering for my new designs. Also—and this is what upset me, Wade—one said that Blackie, a nickname we have for my rival, was on his way out here."

STEPS could be heard retreating from the inner side of the screen door. There were a few words more among Virginia, Wade and the two officers, and the officers were gone.

"So that's how you happened to come tonight," she said to Wade, when they were alone, "to warn me. And *you* didn't believe any of it!"

"Of course not," he replied, adding eagerly. "How about having that ride now?"

"As soon as I pack," she chuckled, stooping to cram the bright garments back into the suitcase. "Have to take care of them," she said. "Even though the secret is out, there's still the possibility my process is valuable. There's a clothes hints program on the air that's already mentioned it. I've been listening to it every night to see if they'd got wind of it."

Wade watched in silence. She was a smart girl. Might go far in her business. How could he hope she would want to settle down and help build up a cow outfit?

When they got into the car, he drew a deep sigh. She glanced at him, then snuggled closer against his shoulder. "C'm'on, let's sing while you drive," she murmured.

Something of his old confidence came back to Wade as their voices rose and blended. When they concluded, "'Oh, come with me and we'll go and see the big Rock Candy mountain,'" he said huskily, "Would you go, Virginia—darling?"

"Any place with you," she whispered, her eyes soft as they looked up into his.

"Even if the mountain is a homesteader's log cabin?"

"That's better than even a candy mountain," she laughed, "and a lot more cozy."

He was holding her tight then, feeling the silk of her hair against his cheek, the wonder of her lips on his.

KNOW YOUR WEST

Answers to the questions on page 84

1. They were all from the British Isles.

2. Marihuana (Mah-ree-WAH-nah).

3. The coyote.

4. Oklarado—Oklahoma and Colorado; Texico—Texas and New Mexico; Texarkana—Texas and Arkansas.

5. Open. Otherwise he might hang a foot in them.

6. Yellow pine. The rest are all different names for the same tree—the Douglas fir.

7. The jockey box is a box on the chuck wagon or bed wagon for carrying horseshoeing gear, rough mending equipment and other odds and ends of hardware.

8. Yes, they are born spotted, losing the spots as they grow up.

9. Texas, Oklahoma and Idaho.

10. A cyclone cellar or any dugout or hole in the ground used as shelter from cyclones and tornadoes.

Prices based on first 66 months of both wars
Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

Rationing, price and wage controls have held prices down . . . *but the next step is up to you!*

The silliest man (or woman) in America today is the one who thinks he's ahead of the game when he finds a way around the rules of rationing.

Why is he silly?

Because every time you pay more than ceiling prices, every time you buy rationed goods without stamps, you are breaking down the very controls that have kept your cost of living lower in this war than in World War I.

What else can you do to keep prices down? Tuck away every dollar you can get your hands on. Put it safely away into War Bonds, life insurance, savings banks.

Why? With more money in people's pockets than goods to spend it on—every unnecessary thing you buy tends to push prices up.

Save. Don't spend. It's common sense for today—safety for tomorrow.

ONE PERSON CAN START IT!

You give inflation a boost . . .

—when you buy anything you can do without

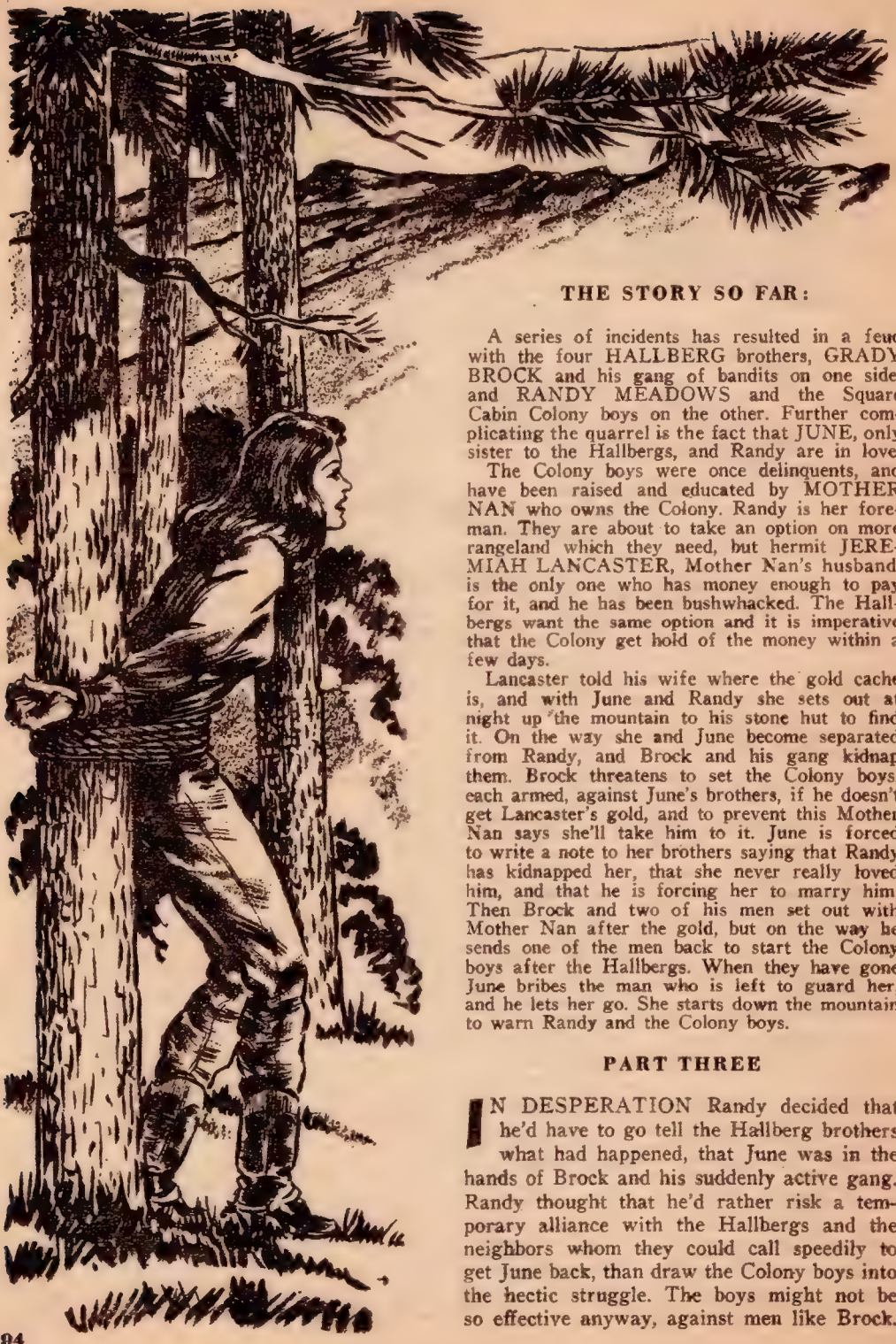
—when you buy above ceiling or without giving up stamps (Black Market)

—when you ask more money for your services or the goods you sell.

SAVE YOUR MONEY. Buy and hold all the War Bonds you can afford —to pay for the war and protect your own future. Keep up your insurance.

HELP US KEEP PRICES DOWN

A United States War message prepared by the War Advertising Council; approved by the Office of War Information; and contributed by this magazine in cooperation with the Magazine Publishers of America.



THE STORY SO FAR:

A series of incidents has resulted in a feud with the four HALLBERG brothers, GRADY BROCK and his gang of bandits on one side, and RANDY MEADOWS and the Square Cabin Colony boys on the other. Further complicating the quarrel is the fact that JUNE, only sister to the Hallbergs, and Randy are in love.

The Colony boys were once delinquents, and have been raised and educated by MOTHER NAN who owns the Colony. Randy is her foreman. They are about to take an option on more rangeland which they need, but hermit JEREMIAH LANCASTER, Mother Nan's husband, is the only one who has money enough to pay for it, and he has been bushwhacked. The Hallbergs want the same option and it is imperative that the Colony get hold of the money within a few days.

Lancaster told his wife where the gold cache is, and with June and Randy she sets out at night up the mountain to his stone hut to find it. On the way she and June become separated from Randy, and Brock and his gang kidnap them. Brock threatens to set the Colony boys, each armed, against June's brothers, if he doesn't get Lancaster's gold, and to prevent this Mother Nan says she'll take him to it. June is forced to write a note to her brothers saying that Randy has kidnapped her, that she never really loved him, and that he is forcing her to marry him. Then Brock and two of his men set out with Mother Nan after the gold, but on the way he sends one of the men back to start the Colony boys after the Hallbergs. When they have gone June bribes the man who is left to guard her, and he lets her go. She starts down the mountain to warn Randy and the Colony boys.

PART THREE

IN DESPERATION Randy decided that he'd have to go tell the Hallberg brothers what had happened, that June was in the hands of Brock and his suddenly active gang. Randy thought that he'd rather risk a temporary alliance with the Hallbergs and the neighbors whom they could call speedily to get June back, than draw the Colony boys into the hectic struggle. The boys might not be so effective anyway, against men like Brock.

Saddle Power

By Clee Woods

It was just getting daylight when Randy rode down onto Wagon Bed River a few miles above the Hallberg home ranch. He was heading for an M Key bunching ground at the mouth of Muleshoe Creek. If the Hallbergs had sent their cowboys back to their roundup work, they'd have a bunch of cattle gathered there by this time.

He heard the bawl of cattle off in the bottom, and then he saw them, fifteen hundred whitefaces fresh off the summer grass of the high country. It was just light enough for Randy to make out three tents and a big bunch of riders about the rope corral. They were hurriedly roping horses and slinging on saddles.

A rider galloped out toward the cattle, going after the two punchers who were on the breakfast guard.

"Hey, Bob—Remus," the messenger yelled.

"He-ooo-ooo!" somebody answered.

"Shag it on over here quick," the messenger shouted. "Randy Meadows, he's got June a prisoner off somewhere and a-fixin' to make 'er marry him or somethin'. I don't hardly know what the hell. Come on, King wants every damn man of us!"

Randy pulled up. Now what was coming off? If King Hallberg and his brothers really believed that, he better not fall into their hands. Instantly, Randy suspected Grady Brock's hand in this, too. He'd not felt too safe in the first place in coming to the Hallbergs for help, yet June's safety came first.

Before Randy could make up his mind what to do someone saw him. Then the four Hallberg brothers leaped to saddles. King led them straight out toward Randy. They came at a hard run, as though they thought he had come upon them by accident and was about to turn and dash off.

For a few seconds longer Randy measured his chances. Run for his life, or sit here and try to make them believe him? His natural inclination was against flight, with such an absurd charge against him. He wanted to put them right on June's disappearance. Also, he had little chance of outrunning them. His horse was dinked by hours of very hard riding since the two women were snatched away from him.

"I'll stick it out," he decided. "They've got to believe me."

Randy had his guns, of course, but he'd made up his mind that he never was going to kill one of June's brothers. His hand twitched at the reins, wanting to whirl that horse and get out of there, but he beat back the primitive impulse to run.

King Hallberg was the first to pull up in front of him. His three brothers fanned in close by him, each one's face aflame with hate of Randy and all he stood for. The next instant the M Key cowboys were spreading out

about him, to make sure he didn't try a sudden bolt.

"Meadows, where's June?" King demanded.

"That's why I came to find you Hallbergs," Randy answered. "Brock grabbed June and Mother Nan on the trail last night, when we were going after Lancaster's gold."

"That's enough of such talk!" King snapped. "June just outsmarted you and sent us a letter telling all about your damned revenge stuff on her. Now where've you got her—before I shoot you out of that saddle."

King pulled a six-shooter, cocked it, and pushed his horse up until the muzzle of the Colt was within a foot of Randy's face.

"Talk fast," King ordered.

"I'm telling you the truth!" Randy cried. "Brock's got June."

"I'll take June's word, in her own handwriting," King said.

Filled with rage against him, Duke Hallberg pushed in and slapped a noose rope down about Randy's neck. He threw his horse sideways and jerked Randy out of the saddle.

"Tie his hands behind his back, Knight," Duke called. "Then, Meadows, we're going to drag you along while we hunt for our sister. If you want to make it easier on yourself, just tell us which way to go."

Knight sprang off beside Randy, took out a piggin string and grasped at his hands. Prince Hallberg was reaching for Randy's six-shooter. Again a wild impulse flashed over Randy—just to beat him to that gun and shoot till they got him. Yet the very foolhardiness of such a move held him rigid. Deep dismay swept over him as he felt the rawhide tighten about his wrists until it hurt.

The next moment Knight spurred up the canyon, jerking Randy after him. Riders swarmed along. Randy had to run to keep from being jerked down and dragged by his neck.

"Tell us which way to go when you get tired of it," King called to him.

"I can't tell you," Randy answered. "Not if you kill me, I can't tell you where June is, except that Brock has her."

"Then we'll kill you," King vowed, "for her letter still makes you out a liar!"

KNIGHT Hallberg dallied the rope about his saddle horn and hauled Randy along, his hands still tied behind his back. Randy had to run to keep up with their horses. Once he stumbled off balance and was thrown headlong. Knight let him drag a little before he stopped. The noose choked Randy until things went black before his eyes. They halted long enough for Randy to twist himself back to his feet. Nobody offered to help him.

"Where is she?" King demanded, as Randy sucked back his wind. "We're going to keep going like this till you tell us which way to head."

"I never can tell you because I don't know," Randy gasped.

"Then let's travel till he thinks he can tell us," Knight suggested.

Off they went again at the punishing gait. Randy had all he could do to stay up with them. He wondered how the awful ordeal was going to end. He feared that they were so worked up that they would drag him to death when they saw he wasn't going to tell them where June was.

Then a desperate thought rushed into his head. Maybe he could convince them that he was telling the truth. He plunged into it without giving himself time to shrink from the consequences if he failed.

"Listen, Hallbergs," he called as he ran, "I've told you the plain truth. Brock has June a prisoner, along with Mother Nan. They're going to that gold or have it right now—two hundred and ten thousand dollars' worth. Brock somehow must've made June write you the letter you say you got from her. He'd do that to make you kill me."

Randy quit running. Knight kept his horse at a trot. Randy was jerked down, dragged. Knight's horse took the wrong way around a cluster of rocks. Knight tried to swerve him so that Randy's head would miss a large root that sloped out from a fir, but he was too late. Randy's head struck.

"Hold up, Knight," King called. "That knocked him out—that and the rope choking him. Maybe we've gone a little too far."

"I wonder," said Knight, "if he could be telling the truth. It's not beyond Brock to do a thing like that."

The four brothers lit their fat brown cigars and talked further. Randy's last speech had shaken their cocksure attitude and made them half believe him for the moment.

While they still debated on whether to believe Randy or not, a stranger hove into sight. They eyed the newcomer with suspicion. He was six foot six and snaky in build. He swerved out of the trail a little, as though to

avoid the Hallberg group and ride on. But King Hallberg was not letting any stranger pass without questioning him.

"Hold on there, stranger," King called. "Where you heading?"

King didn't care if he did sound belligerent.

"Excuse me, Mister," the stringy Swink Tellman replied, touching spurs to his horse, "but I ain't sidin' in with nobody. There seems to be too much hell loose on this range for a saddle bum like me to stick around. *Adios.*"

They were clever ones, these henchmen of Grady Brock. Swink Tellman was playing hard to get. Three cowboys blocked the man's way.

"How do you know there's grief on this range?" King demanded.

"Why, there's a whole passle o' fighters on their way down this canyon. Mostly boys, seemed to me like. Some jist kids no more'n twelve or fourteen. But they sure was on the prod. I got away from 'em only by explainin' that I was on my way up the canyon, not down, a-lookin' for a place to hole up a couple o' weeks and ride a little for my chuck. Even then they purt' nigh didn't let me go, only they didn't know what to do with me exactly."

"How many of them?" King asked.

"Oh, mebbe three dozen. Armed to the teeth, too."

The Hallberg brothers looked at each other. So here it was at last. The Colony boys were showing their true colors, and now they were coming to attack the M Key ranch. It could be nothing else. They still regarded Mother Nan's boys as nothing but riffraff. Plenty had happened already to make such boys think that they ought to shoot up the M Key ranch, or so the Hallbergs reasoned.

"Well," King said, "the quicker we stop those savage boys and get on after June, the better off we'll be. Better waylay them up the canyon, there where the rimrocks come close down to the treetops, and stop them cold. If they want to make a fight of it then, they can have it. I hate to fight kids of any kind, but they've got us outnumbered and many of them are practically grown men."

"What about him?" Knight Hallberg asked, jerking his head toward Randy.

"Fetch him along. Let's see," and King named off four of his cowboys, "you boys pick Meadows up and bring him after us. You," looking at Tellman, "help pack him. The rest of us'll hurry on. Don't come into the Narrows, but take to the rimrock just this side of the neck. When you get there, Fink, you stay and guard Meadows and this beanpole stranger. You others come on and join me."

King led his party of fourteen men hurriedly up the canyon. As they neared the place of ambush he ordered, "No smoking, fellows. The breeze is up the canyon toward them." King tossed away his own big brown cigar and Knight grumbled at losing a freshly lighted one.

ARCHIE Sinclair, slim, freckled, just eighteen, rode at the head of twenty-six Colony boys and young men. They'd held a council of war long before daylight after the stranger came and reported that Randy was in danger of being lynched by the Hallbergs. Boys under fourteen were forced to drop out. Archie hadn't known then, of course, that Randy was free at the moment and only about to decide to go for the Hallbergs. Brock had planned for the boys to march upon the Hallberg ranch in wild-boy impulsiveness, whether Randy was in danger there or not. Once the boys appeared in force, Brock had reasoned, the Hallbergs would make it plenty hot for them and then use the incident to discredit the Colony. They'd get Randy some place else, then.

Brock's plans now were working out to greater perfection than he'd hoped for. Even Randy was in the hands of the Hallbergs. There was just one possible hitch. Archie Sinclair had a wise head on him and Randy had been his teacher. Archie wasn't plunging his Colony comrades into a crazy fight regardless of all consequences. But they did mean to stop the Hallbergs from lynching Randy.

Just now they made a formidable band as they pushed down the canyon. Before they were within a mile of the place called the Narrows, Archie's little spotted dog stopped and barked, hair bristling all the way down his back and up his curly tail. Archie called, "Quiet, Spec! Come here."

Spec came back, growling and wanting to bark. Then everybody spied ahead a slight figure, afoot. It was hurrying down the canyon, in the early dawn. But it paused, waited, when the clatter of hoofs resounded nearer.

"Great bob-tailed babies!" Fatty Hope exclaimed, his big eyes bulging, "It's June Hallberg or I'm a polecat's papa! Wonder if her brothers aren't close by?"

"She's Randy's girl," the serious Archie said. "Maybe we better let her talk for herself."

June was so anxious to do that talking that she ran to meet the boys. Her Justin boots, green moleskin breeches and red shirt were very wet and sad from hurrying through wet underbrush. She had no hat now and her golden hair fell down her back.

"Hello, boys," she greeted. "I'll bet some stranger rode into the Colony this morning and told you Randy was going to be lynched."

"How'd you know all that?" Fatty demanded, his voice squeaking very high on the last words.

"I know it," June told them, "because Brock had me a prisoner when he sent out that same snaky Swink Tellman with the story—after he'd promised Mother Nan not to if she'd tell him where Mr. Lancaster's gold is."

"Powie!" Fatty exclaimed. "That gold means the Turtle Nine or no Turtle Nine to us!"

"She really told?" Archie moaned. "Why did she?"

"She did it because she thought she could save you boys from fighting my brothers and their cowboys," June said. "You mustn't go on now. That's the very thing Mother Nan is praying you won't do."

Fatty was suddenly swept by distrust. He shrieked, "You're just sayin' that to keep us from smokin' up your own Hallberg gang. Me now, I'm one man that don't trust women!"

Instantly, Fatty drew a following from the other boys. Many were of the opinion that it was bad business to let this sister of the Hallbergs turn them back. Archie was strongly inclined to believe June, but he didn't insist upon complete abandonment of their mission.

"Suppose," he said, "that we just ride on and take a look at things for ourselves. The Hallbergs're on roundup not far from here."

"But you might head into some of our cowboys and start trouble," June objected. "They're on trigger-edge, just like you boys."

"I wish Randy were here," Archie said. "Where'll we find him, if your brothers don't have him captured?"

"Somewhere back there in the mountains, looking for me and Mother Nan right now, I imagine. I'll tell you what, let's hit back into the mountain and try to help Randy keep Brock away from that gold."

JUNE saw the instant the counter proposal was out that she'd been too hasty to reach it. The boys squirmed, betrayed new fear that Fatty was right. More joined in the mistrust which he kept fanning. They argued, divided. June pleaded with them until she saw every word she said only strengthened the mistrust which the boys would naturally have in her.

The pow-wow ended in a decision to ride on as far as the roundup grounds and determine for themselves what the Hallberg brothers were up to.

"Then," June proposed, "let me ride and tell my brothers you're coming and why, so they won't think you're jumping them without warning."

"You'd only get them all set to smoke us up, mebbe," Fatty vetoed quickly. "I make the motion that you stay right with us till we have a squint at that roundup camp."

"All right, but let's hurry," June implored them.

That sent the boys off down the canyon in a trot. Riding faster to the ambush, Archie took Spec onto his horse, carrying the little pooch under one arm.

But just before they got into the Narrows, Spec sniffed, growled. Archie suddenly held up his hand for a halt. He motioned for the boys to huddle near.

"Smell it? Cigar smoke."

The boys gazed at the forbidding Narrows in awe. The cigar smoke was very faint on the up-canyon breeze, but it was unmistakable. Many eyes rolled at June now. Even Archie looked at her with sudden distrust.

"Wait here, boys," Archie said. "I think I'll just slip up onto this south rimrock and find out who's smoking a cigar here at this time in the morning. Bill, you come with me. Wayne, you take Brick and slip up onto the north rimrock. Watch your step, and be back inside fifteen minutes."

"Archie, may I go with you?" June asked.

"I'm afraid not, ma'am. You better stay here," and his words were more an order than a suggestion.

With hardly a crunch of boot on gravel, Archie took to the canyon-side afoot. He was more of a man than his eighteen years indicated. The others he'd detailed for the scouting also were more men than boys, because they'd aged by adversity even before Mother Nan began her work of making men out of them.

IT WASN'T ten minutes until Archie was back. His face was set, uncompromising. "Don't you move," he ordered June. We're tying you up, and if you let out one squawk, we'll have to gag you."

"Why, Archie, what is it?" June asked, face draining white.

"Your brothers've got an ambush all set for us, sure enough. Thick as hops along this south rimrock, down low near the trail. What's more, they've got Randy tied up over there!"

Archie's low voice vibrated with sudden emotion. He took June by the arm and began pulling her off toward a clump of squaw bushes. The edge of these bushes was within distant view of the rimrock bend where her brothers lay waiting for them.

"You made him think you're his girl," he charged, "and all just to lead him into their hands for a lynching, soon as they rid themselves of us!"

June denied, begged. Not a boy believed her now. Wayne and Brick came in, with ample verification of the presence of the Hallberg crew on the rimrock. Archie had left Bill Kincannon to watch the Hallbergs, and especially the one man whom he'd seen sitting guard over Randy down in the canyon below the Narrows.

"They've already got a rope around Randy's neck," Archie told June, sudden-born hate for her flaring into his honest blue eyes. "Why they haven't strung him up is a mystery to me. You'll stay tied till we smoke that Hallberg gang off the rimrock."

"But can't you get Randy turned loose first?" June asked anxiously. "I don't want any fight to start with him there."

"We'll look after Randy in our own way, ma'am, and you never mind any more advice."

"Oh, Archie, if you'd only believe me!" June moaned. "Let me go explain to my brothers that this is all Brock's work and—"

"Yes," Archie cut in mockingly, "just let you go warn them that we're about to slip in behind them and blow them off that rimrock!"

"No, Archie, don't do that!" June cried. "They're my brothers! Brock's got us all right where he wants us."

Regretfully, a little timidly even, Archie clapped a hand over her mouth as her impassioned words grew louder.

"You leave us nothing to do but gag you, much as I hate to, Miss," Archie said. "Then we'll tie you to that pine back in the squaw bushes. But we'll come turn you loose soon as it can be done safe, I promise."

June begged him with her eyes. Archie still held her mouth shut. When Fatty took out his handkerchief and came up, June suddenly twisted loose. Then in a whisper she begged again. But the boys were too aroused, too eager to get on to the rescue of Randy. Half a dozen held her; Archie pulled the handkerchief securely into her mouth and tied it in a double hard knot at the back of her head. Then the boys hid their horses in a little side draw and stole up the side of the canyon even more expertly than older, stiffer men might have done.

THE Hallbergs had tossed away four cigars before they took to the rimrock for the ambush. Oddly enough, two of the discarded cigars played important parts in the morning's events.

"Oh, boy," said Tellman when he spied a half-smoked cigar still burning by the trail, "I'm dead for a good puff at a cigar."

Tellman was a smart one. He'd expected to cut in ahead of the Hallberg brothers and tell the Colony boys that the ambush was waiting for them. In that way, Tellman planned to create a real battle, in which many on both sides would get killed. Brock had said that he wanted these factions to destroy each other. It would leave the Hallbergs stronger than ever merely to shoot up the Colony boys and get them headed off the river.

But when a guard kept a close eye on Tellman, he was balked. He'd beat through his mind repeatedly for a means of preventing the Colony boys from riding straight into the ambush for a one-sided battle. Now the cigar just barely might do it.

Tellman grabbed it up and puffed until the cigar was glowing again. Then he nursed the smoke along, making it last every dragging minute he could. The smoke he blew off over his head, in the hope that some of it might travel across the gooseneck bend in the canyon and reach the nostrils of Colony boys. The guard, Fink, never stopped him. It just didn't occur to this hard-working dullard whom King had left behind as the least able fighter, that smoke might betray the ambush.

Fink was just leaving the canyon for the rimrock, herding the now conscious Randy along with Tellman, when Randy spied a fat

brown cigar. Its lighted end was turned into the breeze and smoke still curled faintly from it. Randy promptly feigned returning unconsciousness, reeled and fell squarely across the burning cigar, his face to the skies.

"Humph!" said Fink. "Must've got a powerful hard lick, to go out a second time like this. Mebbe the rope's choked 'im, huh?" and Fink stooped over to feel of the noose about Randy's neck. "Nope, not too tight," Fink puzzled.

Fink looked at Tellman as if hoping for a suggestion or explanation. Randy, seeing him out of narrowed eyes, twisted a little until he felt the hot end of the cigar burn his arm. Then at the next chance he moved his wrists down until he thought he had the rawhide against the fire.

He burned his wrist until he knew blisters were forming. But he kept on relentlessly, pressing that rawhide to the glowing end of the cigar. Only let him burn the piggin string enough for him to heave the weakened thongs apart.

Then, he was dismayed to find that he'd set his shirt sleeve afire. He squirmed, trying to put it out by pressure. That burned him until he hardly could keep the pain from his face. But still he kept that masked face to the sky, and never moved when Fink or Tellman was watching. He surged wrists against the crisping rawhide, but it held.

THEN the guns broke loose on the rimrock! The sound of the murderous fire turned Randy sick through and through. He thought it meant two horrible things: Slaughter of the Colony boys and a red blotch on the good name of the Hallbergs.

At the first sound of the rifles and six-shooters, Fink leaped up. The next moment he forced Tellman to flop down. Fink tied Tellman's hands hastily, then he raced up the slope toward the rimrock.

Randy risked a more valiant try at burning his rawhide, even while Fink was still within sight. The instant Fink disappeared among the rocks, Randy heaved on his wrists in stark desperation. Still they held. He tried again, gritting his teeth at the pain and throwing the last ounce of strength he could summon against the rawhide. The rawhide gave way!

Randy didn't wait to see whether Tellman was looking or not. He tore off his smoking shirt sleeve and leaped to a crouching run; sped for the brush-sprinkled rocks and bounded up the steep slope.

From a high rock he took hasty survey of the battle. It was a battle royal, but not the kind he'd feared. The kids had the Hallberg gang cornered!

The Colony boys had slipped in very close and formed a semicircle about the rimrock point before they let their presence be known. Not a Hallberg man could go out across that rough, rocky point and reach a place where he could risk dropping off, without fearful exposure to rifle fire. Now they were down behind rocks and brush, returning the fire with all the vigor of the Colony guns.

Randy dropped back and hurried around to the foot of the rimrock. He thought that everybody on top was too hard at the fight to see or hear him. The one place he thought he might climb was a jagged break in the cliff wall all the way around on the far side.

That meant more than a quarter of a mile swing around the bend, over the roughest kind of going. The roar of the guns above tortured him as he bounded down over rocks, climbed back through the brush, raced along an even space and climbed again.

The guns still were at it angrily when he reached the place he must climb. Up it he went. He had no gun, no plan even, if one bare hope failed him. Certainly no man could have made it down this way. Randy was less than halfway up at the end of the first minute's clumb. Every pop of the rifles above made him fear he was going to be too late.

Soon he was peering over the rimrock. There lay a Hallberg rifleman some hundred yards away. The rocks were too uneven for him to see the other men hugged down among them.

Randy eased over the rimrock, making for the one man he could see. He was crouched low, and using what scant cover he could as he stole toward the man. No Indian could have glided through those rocks more expertly.

JUST then came a distant cry. He had circled so far around that he had come within sight of June where they'd left her tied in the squaw bushes. She could see him out through the branches, evidently, but he couldn't see her. Somehow, she'd spit out her gag.

"Randy, don't do it, I beg you!" he heard the girl's tearful plea.

She'd identified him from hundreds of yards

away. She no doubt had been able to follow the fight well enough to understand that Randy was creeping in behind her brothers. She could believe nothing else but that Randy meant to kill the Hallbergs if it came to that. Randy couldn't call back to her, didn't even dare risk any sort of sign language he might have used. He eased down into the rocks.

But he heard her imploring at the top of her voice, "Randy, if you love me, don't kill one of my brothers! Come turn me loose. I'm tied up. I'll stop the fight some way for you."

But Randy kept going, much as it hurt him to go against June. He knew that the girl's promise was made only in the sheerest desperation. She couldn't pull those stubborn, fearless brothers of hers out of this thing, now that blood had been spilled.

"Randy," he heard her last tearful appeal, "stop right there! Don't go on, or I'll hate you to the day I die!"

June wouldn't say a thing like that unless she meant it. This put his love for her to the bitterest of tests. But it couldn't be helped. He had to think of the day when he still hoped to face all four of June's brothers man to man, and be a brother to them with no bitter regrets to stand between them through life.

He kept on crawling toward the Hallberg cowboy. Now there was not another rock or grass hummock between him and his man. But the fellow was watching too intently along his rifle barrel. Randy gripped a stone in his hand and made a fatal leap.

He landed on the man's back and whacked him on the head with the rock just as the fellow whirled sideways. The man wilted where he lay.

Randy took the cowboy's rifle and six-shooter with him and stole toward the spot where another rifle was coughing fire. Again Randy found the man off a little to himself. A second man was where he might catch sight of Randy, though, if he happened to turn his head and look. Randy had to depend on the excitement and the fact that all eyes kept focused on that circle of boys. By this time the Hallberg men had learned to respect the aim of those Colony boys.

Randy made his second daring leap and got his man the same way. But the third man spied him just as Randy started for him. Randy jabbed his cocked rifle at the man.

"Don't let out a squeal," Randy warned, "or I'll blow you off this rimrock."

The man refused to lift his hands; he just lay behind his rifle, uncertain. Then he let Randy come up to him and take the gun.

Randy tied the man but didn't take time to gag him. "Let one squawk," Randy said, "and I'll get you first of all."

Then he headed for the fourth man. It was King Hallberg himself and Knight lay only ten feet away. Randy saw that he had to take them both together.

He eased up until he was directly behind the two Hallbergs. Then he levelled the Winchester at them and called in a low voice, "Hug the dirt, King, Knight, and don't move."

But King Hallberg was a man of decisive action. He yelled, "Duke, Meadows has got us covered. Come, quick!"

RANDY felt something cold rush over him. If the Hallbergs rushed him, he'd have to save himself by shooting at them.

"Hold it!" Randy cried. "I don't want to kill you, but I've got you covered. You're too outnumbered to make me wade in and shoot to kill."

Whether they were influenced by his frantic appeal or just acted from the plain hard fact that he could probably kill them if they forced him to, neither King nor Knight made a break for a gun. Seeing their lack of action, at least lack for the first second or so, Randy sped toward them. Somebody fired at him and forced him to duck lower, but he flopped behind a rock only steps from the two brothers.

"Call off the fight," Randy blurted out the few words that needed most of all to be said first, "and I'll get the Colony boys out. I don't want any more of them killed and I don't want to hurt a man of you. This is all Brock's dirty work—throwing us against each other."

Randy saw the words bring quick dismay to King's face. The Hallbergs were in a precarious spot, and King had the sense to see it. They'd been pressed mighty hard already by the Colony fighters alone. Four of his men had been wounded, and one was dying.

"Hey, Archie, hold it," Randy shouted. "I'm over here, and we're patching up a peace."

"Like hell we are!" King exploded. "I'll never stop till we've got June back and you mangy jailbirds run off my range!"

There it was. The grit to fight it out, no matter what odds. But Randy caught at a quick hope.

"June's right across yonder in the brush,"

he told King. "I don't know how come she's there or who's—"

"Never mind denying anything," King cut in.

Randy shouted again to the Colony boys, trying to get their guns quieted. But the boys were fight-crazy now. Now that the kids had caught the smell of victory, they weren't willing to quit.

KING dashed Randy's last hope of stopping the battle immediately when he said in a tense voice to his brother, "Knight, here's the man to put out of our way. Let's get him!"

As much as King feared Randy, he was willing to make the fatal break against him. He must have seen that there was not time to call for Duke or Prince or anybody else. Just he and Knight must shoot it out with this fast gunslinger boss of the Square Cabin Colony.

Randy came to an instant decision. He couldn't plunge into a bloody gun fight with June's two brothers like this. Accordingly, while Knight was muttering his readiness for the showdown break, Randy suddenly whirled and made a headlong dive over the nearest upthrust of rock. Two guns roared at him as he went down behind the scant cover.

"Run, you lousy jailbird!" King cried. "So we've got your number at last! You can't stand up and fight!"

Randy knew King was surprised and overjoyed to find this evidence of cowardice in him. "King," he hastened to call, "I couldn't fight you as long as I had a chance any other way—solely because you're June's brother. But don't crowd me, or I'll have to shoot to kill." Then he yelled to Archie, "Hey, boys, go get June, quick. Turn her loose and let her come to straighten this thing all out quick for the Hallbergs."

"We'll get her as soon as we can," Archie shouted back. "But you're in too tight a spot to leave you now, Randy."

"King," Randy pleaded, "for heaven's sake, listen to reason. Hold your fire till June can get here."

Grudgingly, King said, "All right then, but tell 'em to make it snappy."

Randy saw that King was agreeing to a momentary truce only because he wanted to get June back safe into his hands first of all. It took more shouting back and forth before the Colony boys let up in their fire and the Hallbergs waited with cocked rifles. With such a brittle lull, one of the boys left his cover and ran for the canyon rim, going after June.

The truce grew more tense, more like a closed-in fire ready to burst out again in an uncontrollable explosion. Randy could tell that some of the Hallberg riders were taking advantage of the lull to crawl nearer to him and King, now the center of all interest.

"Stop your men from crawling my way, King," Randy ordered. "I'm not waiting for them to get a circle around me."

King was good enough sport to realize the justice of that demand. But his order for his men to lie still came out grudgingly. This was a hard fight to keep down. Fighting blood still boiled hot.

It wasn't two minutes before Archie called, "Hey, Randy, I see a Hallberg snake sneaking up on you!"

From his high vantage point Archie could see what Randy couldn't see while hugged down behind the rocks. King again boomed an order to his men to lie still.

"Let another one crawl an inch toward him," Archie threatened, "and he gets a wad of bullets through him."

"But maybe they've got more boys rushing here," one man barked in fear to King. "We better fight our way outa this while we can."

Within another minute the explosion came. Somebody fired just one shot, and then guns from both sides were at it again. Randy's position grew untenable. As they fought, Hallberg men were edging nearer and nearer him. They all realized that he was the driving power behind this battle. Get him and the battle was half won, even with the odds stacked against them yet.

FREED from her bonds, June came over the rimrock on the run, straight between the two factions.

And now she slowed to a walk, looking from side to side in keenest distress as bullets streaked a pattern back and forth about her.

"King, stop it and listen to me," she cried desperately.

"If one of your jailbirds shoots that girl, Meadows," King warned Randy, "I'm coming over that rock after you the first thing."

Archie and Randy both shouted at the Colony boys to hold their fire. Then King ordered his men to let up. The guns subsided.

June ran to King. Hastily she told him how Brock had forced her to write him that letter

in which she accused Randy of driving her into a wedding.

"But how could he force you to write it?" King wanted to know.

"He threatened to send the Colony boys against you if I didn't," June answered. "Said he'd tell them you were lynching Randy. Then when he had the letter he did it anyway, just as though he'd made no promise. It's Brock we all want to get."

"Don't lump us in with any Colony riff-raff," King objected.

"Oh, King, if you'd only see that Colony in its true light," June said.

"You're still for them, then?" King exclaimed. "And for this Meadows bird?"

In a few long strides Randy was facing her, had a big hand on her shoulder. Those deep, quiet blue eyes of his were imploring her, searching her very soul.

"Don't turn me down now," he pleaded in a whisper. "I had to come on over the rimrock, honey, or see all hell turn loose."

June's dark eyes met his, read his overwhelming love. She felt the magnificent strength of him, and knew that this ungainly cowboy was sincere and good.

King said from the side, "It's true, then. She still thinks she's in love with him. And to think," he went on bitterly, "that I've risked all our lives here like this, lost one man's life and got others shot up, just for—for nothing but a girl who belongs in that jailbird Colony!"

It was his final sentence to June. "All right, men," he finished, "let's get out of here, unless they want to start this fight all over again."

"Nope, boys, let 'em go," Randy ruled. "We've got another job ahead of us that's more important."

"You're goin' soft, Randy," Fatty rebelled. "That girl's sure to be the ruin of us."

But Randy prevailed. The Hallbergs, sullen defiant, still aflame, picked up their dead comrade and the wounded and made their way down over the rimrock. Randy gathered his boys, to go in the other direction and June came over to join them.

Randy saw quickly that the other boys shared Fatty's sentiment. "What's wrong, what's she done, boys?" He tried to talk away their objections.

"Mostly," Fatty said, "she tried to stop us

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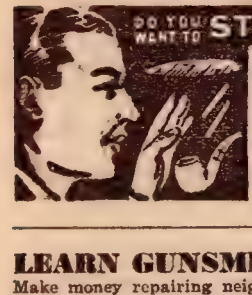

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from coming here to get you turned loose, Randy. That's enough. But what's more, she hatches up a wild tale about being captured and promisin' to pay forty thousand dollars to some guy to get loose."

Even the solid-minded Archie Sinclair put in, "She sure did make herself sound fishy."

JUNE, hearing all this youthful frankness, saw quickly that she was going to become a barrier between Randy and these boys. They needed Randy now, as they never had needed him before.

"Randy," she said, "I can't go over to your side until your boys want me. Good-by."

She made off toward the rimrock, following her brothers. Randy sprang after her, clamped fingers onto her arm. He made her face him.

"June," he said, "the kids'll come around and see you're on the square. Come on, go with us. I can't let you just drift away from me like this."

She said so all the boys could hear, "Stick by the Colony boys, Randy. I'll show them yet where my heart is."

"It's too risky to let you go," Randy said.

"I'm big enough to go to the store and back by myself, Randy," she smiled. "Before I go, though, there's something you need to know—you and your boys."

She told them all she knew of Brock's present attempt to snatch the Lancaster gold.

"I'm afraid he's got it by this time," June lamented. "Poor Mother Nan! What it must've cost her to take Brock to the gold that her husband hoarded up in a lifetime for her Colony!"

"If only we can overtake him before he has time to get far with the stuff," Randy said. "You know two hundred and ten thousand in gold will load three mules down, and that's not a load you can skip out with very fast."

"Brock can't get away from all us Colony men," Archie said.

Randy considered. Would he use the Colony boys against Brock? Throw them into another fight? They'd proved themselves real fighters, certainly. But some were wounded and that was enough. He would call on the boys again only as a last resort.

"You boys better hit for the Square Cabin," he said.

"No, Randy," Archie said positively, "not so long as Mother Nan's off somewhere in

Brock's hands. Even the little boys back at the Square Cabin have a right to go help fetch her back—and that gold, too. That gold makes us a big outfit, means we can stand up and be proud from here on."

"Let them, Randy," June interceded.

"All right," Randy agreed to something already mulled over. "I'll split you up into bunches of six. Each bunch takes a different direction and cuts for sign, after we're all well back near where they grabbed Mother Nan. We'll name a place for you to rush back to when you cut fresh sign."

To himself Randy resolved that he'd go alone to the one area where the hunt for the gold would inevitably come—back to Lancaster's rock house. The cache just about had to be near that house.

"Well, I'll be seeing you," said June, heading off by herself.

ONLY a mile down the canyon, King Hallberg proved how all eyes were turning in just one direction—where the Lancaster gold lay.

"You see," King said confidentially to his three brothers, "either we've got to wipe that Colony out mighty quick, or they'll be too strong for us. Those kids've tasted blood. They'll be on the prod from here on till we run them out."

"Every word you say is gospel, King," Knight agreed.

"All right, then we four must act fast. You know what I mean, too."

"The gold," Duke muttered.

"Yes, and we'll find it somewhere around Lancaster's rock house. That stands to plain reason. We've got to keep that much fighting power out of their hands. Got to keep it out of Brock's hands, too. He'd still be a power, with all that money to hire dozens of cutthroats. We four go alone, for we can't trust hired cowboys on a deal so big and involved as this. Not, understand, that I want to take the gold for ourselves. All we want to do is to get it, hide it away and keep it out of this Colony's hands, and Brock's, until we've wound up all this business the way it's got to go."

"And that," said Knight, "is for us to buy the Turtle Nine ranch, kill Brock and Randy Meadows and run the Colony clean off Wagon Bed River."

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"Exactly right," King confirmed. "And June goes with them."

"She's no sister of ours," Prince added his solemn avowal. "And how about her share in our M Key ranch?"

"We'll have it appraised, borrow the money and pay her for her one-fifth share."

"But that lets Randy get hold of her money—a fifth of a million dollars!" Knight exclaimed.

"It's her funeral," King ruled. "Besides, Randy Meadows will never live to put his hands on her money."

The Hallbergs were acting out of what they regarded as fast principles of the cow country. But four more men turned aching greed toward the Lancaster gold.

One by one they gathered back into the pothole to which Brock had ordered them to return. Hartsfield first, his hate of Randy throbbing hot within him. Randy Meadows had killed his brother months ago and Hartsfield had vowed to even the score.

Weeds Batchelder came in next, but without that check for five thousand which Brock had suggested his getting from the Hallbergs. "I thought they'd mob me when I asked for the five thousand," he told Hartsfield. "They hate Brock and us of this bunch next to Randy Meadows. So I watched my chance, leaped through a winder and high-tailed it."

Swink Tellman drifted in next, jubilant. "I left the Hallbergs and Colony kids a-mixin' it up bloody enough even to suit Brock," he reported.

Then came the bombshell. Cat Treadhill staggered in, blood all down his side and one arm in an improvised sling. His face was black with rage.

"Brock tried to murder me," he blurted out. "He did kill Zenner. Shot him square through the back of the head. I heard the shot, and when I turned around, I saw the gun gougin' for me. I ducked behind a tree, but he got me in the shoulder and the arm, like you see. I dived over a cliff and into a big creek pool where the water was rough. Then I ducked in under some alder bushes and stuck just enough of my nose out so I could breathe. He must've figured I'd drowned."

"Where was this?" Hartsfield asked slowly.

"Way up near old Lancaster's rock shack."

"After he thought he just as good as had the yellow stuff in his hands," the snaky Tell-

man said. "What a leader we picked! I move we get Brock first, and the gold next. Where's Kittridge?"

Hartsfield didn't dare tell of his plan to sell out to June Hallberg, nor how Kittridge had beat him to it in a very clever move. "That girl got away from us," Hartsfield explained. "Kitt is out trying to recapture her."

"I wish he'd come on back," Cat said. "We need Kitt. I want to make dead sure we wipe Brock off the face of the earth when we run into him. And our best bet is right back where the old woman must take him, or somewhere near the Lancaster rock house.

Within a few minutes they were ready to go; four bitter, desperate man, and all still mortally afraid of Brock and that infinite Brock cunning. Yet all determined to square the account and take the pay-off.

BROCK himself hadn't had everything so rosy. Mother Nan had become lost in the night, either actually lost or simulating it so well he couldn't punish her for it. Daylight found them still nowhere near the gold. Mother Nan took the wrong creek again. Brock stopped her.

"Now see here, old woman," he said, "you get that noodle of yours clear and take me to that stuff or I'll still send these men back to start your Colony kids on the warpath."

"It's time," he told himself, "to get rid of these two bloodsuckers. Then the others'll be easier to deal with."

"Maybe we better take the next creek up," Mother Nan answered Brock's demands. "My husband said it was near his rock house but he never said it was on the same creek."

"Let's try the same creek anyway."

Soon after that his chance came. Zenner and Cat both made the fatal mistake of turning their backs at the same time. Brock fired.

After Zenner fell and Brock had chased the wounded Cat to the brink of the pool and given up seeing him reappear in the water, he came back to Mother Nan. Mother Nan looked from him to the body of Zenner, with the dark pool spreading into the pine needles. In her eyes now was that same tragic horror which June had seen there when Mother Nan first was making up her mind to yield to Brock's demand about the gold. This time the horror was deeper, more pitiful.

"All right, Mr. Brock," she barely whis-

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pered, "I understand now. I'll take you to the gold as straight as I can. Let's go."

It took them another half hour to reach the foot of the trail on Lancaster Creek, directly beneath the rock house.

"Ah, it is up there, after all," Brock exclaimed.

"Not in the rock house," Mother Nan told him. "There's another trail."

Her voice was so low Brock had to make her repeat what she'd said. That horror had grown deeper in her eyes, if such a thing were possible.

"I didn't know there was another trail," Brock said. "Let's hit up it, then."

They went down the creek and started the climb. Some four hundred feet above the creek the trail left the scant spruce and snowberry bushes and took to a great rockslide at least six hundred yards across and over half a mile long. It lay on ground so steep that it was a wonder one stone ever stayed upon another.

THERE was only a faint trail climbing upward over the rocks, but any eye could see that here and there stones had been laid aside carefully, where a sort of natural trail had been lost in too many rocks. Brock hesitated a few feet out upon the slide.

"You sure this is it?" he demanded.

"I'm positive," Mother Nan replied.

"I don't like exposing myself out in the open like this," Brock said, looking up and down the barren sweep of rock. "Anybody trailing us can see us a mile down that canyon."

"You're afraid," Mother Nan said. "You're a coward, Brock."

He looked at her with quick anger and suddenly grew afraid of Mother Nan. "You lead me into any trap, old woman, and I'll forget your age or that you're a woman. You saw what I gave Zenner and Cat Treadhill, didn't you?"

"Yes, I saw what you gave them."

Even the way she said that made him more afraid. But he'd never let her know it.

"All right, go on," he said. Mother Nan walked ahead of him up the rock-based trail.

"The stuff's in this rock bar?" Brock demanded.

"It's right around the mountainside there," Mother Nan assured him. "In a little cove, though. But Jeremiah said the cove was hardly deep enough to hide a pack mule from view anywhere on the trail. I'm telling you the truth, Brock," she added, when he seemed to doubt. "It's waiting for you right up there. Waiting for us."

"What do you mean, getting all that mysterious wail in your voice?" Brock demanded.

"Did I? I meant nothing then." But several times she stopped and stared in all directions, as if she feared they were being watched.

BROCK stared, too. He grew more and more uneasy and jumpy. Irritation was in his voice, knitted on his brow.

"You better not be leading me into a trap, old woman," he growled.

Mother Nan answered so promptly it seemed she'd anticipated his threat and was ready for it. "You're driving me into whatever we come up against," she said.

"There you go again!" Brock flared. "If you've got anything on your mind, spit it out."

"Have you got anything on your immortal soul, Brock?" Mother Nan retorted.

"If you're trying to scare me back," Brock blurted out, "I'm on to your game, old woman. Get on, and don't creep so!"

"All right, all right."

She climbed faster. Soon they were going into the tiny cove about midway the slide. At the far side of the slight depression a cliff edge thrust itself out from the slide for a few yards, then was smothered away again by the blanket of loose rock.

Mother Nan said, "It's just above the trail this side of that cliff outcrop, my husband said."

"All right, go on."

Mother Nan asked abruptly, "Are you going to kill me as soon as you see the gold, Brock?"

"Of course not. Go on."

"How do I know you won't? You killed Zenner and Cat Treadhill. You deserve to die yourself, Brock. Yes, you do mean to kill me as soon as you've got the gold located."

She moved on over to the center of the shallow cove. There she stopped and looked intently at the rocks some ten steps above her.

"See that big rock there with three little ones on top of it?" she asked.

"Yes."

"That's the marker. Just four feet above it you pile away a foot of rock and find an old cast-iron stove buried in the rocks. The flat-topped kind, rather long. Lift a lid and there's —there it is."

"The gold, huh?"

(To be concluded)

WITH TEX SHERMAN

EDITOR'S NOTE: From coast to coast the contestants and the men who produce rodeo are Tex Sherman's friends, and this wide knowledge Mr. Sherman has placed at the disposal of readers of Ranch Romances. If you have a question about rodeo, write to Tex Sherman, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y., and enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Mr. Sherman will then send you a personal reply.

THE Will Rogers Coliseum in Fort Worth has again been the scene of the Southwestern Livestock Exposition and Fat Stock Show, which this year showed to 112,000 people. First honors were taken by Homer Pettigrew in calf-roping (total time 60.5 seconds), Gerald Roberts in saddle bronc-riding, Bud Linderman in bareback bronc-riding, Ken Roberts in wild-bull-riding, and Royse Sewalt in steer-wrestling. The purses ran as high as $1,395, which was what Homer Pettigrew received, and the total prize money came to almost $35,000.

While the Fort Worth rodeo was going on, the National Rodeo Ass'n held its convention, with only a few rodeo executives in attendance because of the ban on traveling to conventions. Those on hand were the ones who lived nearby, among them Floyd B. Rigdon of Carlsbad, N. M., Ralph R. Wolf of Waco, Texas, Roy Evans of Dodge City, Kans., and C. A. Studer of Canadian, Texas, secretary of the association. Ralph Wolfe was elected president, Roy Evans and State Senator Clyde Byrd of Little Rock, Ark., vice-presidents, and Carl Studer re-elected secretary-treasurer.

Col. Jim Eskew of JE fame was in Fort Worth for the show, visiting with his old friends Mr. and Mrs. Floyd Randolph. Col. Jim took home with him a few carloads of the Brahma bulls used at the rodeo to challenge the contestants at his own shows.

The war has taken its toll of rodeo folk. Fritz Truan, champion R.A.A. all-around cowboy for 1940, was killed in the Iwo Jima action last February. Fritz was a sergeant in the Marine Corps. We don't know the details of how he was killed, but we know that he went out fighting and that the arena will sorely miss him. Our sympathy goes to his wife.

This year the famous Pendleton Roundup will last for four days, from Sept. 12th through the 15th. Rodeos do not come under the racing ban, so plans are going full speed ahead. In Salt Lake City, Utah, they're putting on their Days of '47 celebration from July 19th through the 24th. This commemorates the entry of Brigham Young and his Mormon pioneers into Utah. The rodeo held in connection with the celebration will be directed by R. A. Richter of Bozeman, Mont., and he will also furnish the stock, according to Secretary Sheldon R. Brewster.

Elsa, Texas, put on a rodeo in May, sponsored by the American Legion which placed $1,600 in the bank for contestants to shoot at. It was staged as a feature of the Cinco de Mayo festival. In order to remind the public that there is a war on, no gasoline was permitted in the rodeo parade and only horse-drawn vehicles and saddle horses did the carrying.

Plenty of other rodeos are taking place on schedule—such as the one being staged along with the Southwest Louisiana Horseshow at Lake Charles. And the Homesteaders' rodeo at Caldwell, Ida., which is held nights, has increased its prize money but not its admission. The four major events will pay $600 altogether, and $200 has been set aside for the amateur bronc-riders to shoot at.

Here is a tip for a well organized rodeo outfit: Norfolk, Va., has over 200,000 military men in it, and they're hungry for entertainment. Also there's a big stadium there and a sizeable local population besides the sailors and soldiers.

Adios,

Tex Sherman

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 20 years Our Air Mail has been running between reader and reader of Ranch Romances, making for them new friends in near and far-off places. Any reader may write directly to anyone whose letter is printed in this department, provided he upholds the clean, wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended solely for those who really want correspondents. We ask you to refrain from using it as a medium for practical jokes and particularly not to sign your letters with other people's names. In accordance with the wishes of the War and Navy Departments, we print no letters to or from service men. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y.

This Is Texas

Dear Editor:

I have been reading Ranch Romances only a short while, and I really like it. Will you please print my plea for new friends? My favorite hobbies are writing letters, reading good books, and riding horses and bicycles. I would like to hear from girls and boys from everywhere, near my own age—that is, between 14 and 20—and I'll send a snapshot to the first five who write to me.

Rt. 5, MARGIE VANZANDT
Mt. Pleasant, Texas

No Last Name?

Dear Editor:

Just plain girl—interested in all sports, music, and letter-writing. Five three and one half, black eyes and dark brown hair, I am of Italian descent, and have reached 24 years. Wish to hear from all between 25 and 35.

559 W. 40 St. NINA
San Pedro, Calif.

Wants Pen Pals in America

Dear Editor:

I live on the outskirts of Manchester, and every day I travel to Manchester to the office where I work as an invoice typist. I am very interested in America and would like to hear more about your country. So if anyone would like to write I would be more than glad to answer any letters. I am 19 years old.

FLORENCE JOHNSON
4, Wanstead Ave., White Moss Estate,
Blackley, Manchester, 9, England

Hurry! Hurry! Hurry!

Dear Editor:

Hello, and who will write to a girl that is 5 ft. 6 in. tall, and maybe easy on the eyes? I collect cute earrings, handkerchiefs, souvenirs, postcards, and many other things. I like traveling a lot, popular music, and the latest song hits. Anyone interested in any of those things is welcome to write, and everyone's letters will be appreciated. Hurry! Hurry! Hurry!

2261 E. 46th Ave. MARY E. ELLIOTT
Vancouver, B. C., Canada

Any Fishermen Around?

Dear Editor:

This is my second attempt at trying to crash the gates of Our Air Mail, and I hope that I succeed. I am a boy of 14, and I live on a farm. About 6 months ago I had to have my right leg amputated. My hobbies are collecting picture postcards, and writing letters. I like all sports, but fishing is my favorite. I have been reading Ranch Romances for about 2½ years. I'll exchange snapshots with those who write, so come on, everybody, get busy!

Rt. 3, Box 53, JACKIE JONES
Harpers Ferry, W. Va.

Another Fisherman

Dear Editor:

How about western Montana getting into your book for a change? I am a steady reader of Ranch Romances, and live on the southern shore of the beautiful Flathead lake which is surrounded by the high, rugged Rockies, and is the home of the biggest trout and bass you ever saw. I am 17 years old, have dark wavy hair and blue eyes, and would like to hear from boys and girls of my own age, so come on, gang! Time's a-wastin!

General Delivery BRUCE DERRICKSON
Polson, Mont.

Veteran from Canadian Army Tank Corps

Dear Editor:

At present I am working up here in northern Canada for the Royal Bank. Where we are located are oil wells, a huge U. S. Army Air Base, and the famous Alaska Highway. I am just recently discharged from the Canadian Army Tank Corps, and I would like to correspond with people all over the globe. Have reached my twenty-first birthday, have dark, wavy hair, am single, and stand over six feet tall. I'd gladly exchange any photos with friends.

Royal Bank of Canada DON CONACHER
Fairview, Alberta, Canada

WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

The Man of Cancer . . . June 22-July 23

By Professor Marcus Mari

Professor Mari will be glad to give a personal reading to anyone who sends this coupon to him in care of Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y. ENCLOSE STAMPED AND SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE.

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CANCER, in the zodiacal sense, has, of course, nothing to do with disease. It's merely the general shape of the constellation that is the fourth sign of the zodiac. In Europe common shore crabs are called cancers. This sign, which lies between Gemini and Leo, gives personal magnetism, authority and leadership to the men fortunate enough to be born under it. They are strong, self-willed, determined men, who may even have to caution themselves against feelings of self-righteousness or martyrdom.

They are clear-headed, fearless, proud men with a sharp zest for life. They like adventure to the point of danger. They are often hasty, sometimes headstrong, but never cowardly or wavering. They can be leaders of whatever field they choose. Other people look to them for inspiration. The Man of Cancer can best hold the admiration of others by always guarding against any trace of arrogance.

The lustiness of this man would seem to demand a very feminine woman. This, however, is not always the case. He will not respect a mate who is without a mind of her own. Nor will a woman who forever clings to him and demands constant advice hold him long. Because of his intense love of beauty in all things, his mate should keep on her toes and be always as attractive as possible. He has little patience with anything slipshod.

The Cancer Man likes music, gayety, a good time. He likes to be surrounded by his friends, and his mate should be willing to keep a home with an open door. He will be wise to find one who is as gregarious as he is.

His many capabilities give the man of Cancer a great opportunity for progress and service. He can succeed in almost anything that keeps him in touch with people. Often he shines in the public eye. Always his bright personality shines in the large circle of those who love him and look up to him.

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Scribe M. R. O.
The Rosicrucians, AMORC
San Jose, California

Gentlemen: Kindly send me, without obligation, the *free* booklet, *"The Mastery of Life."* I understand it explains how I may share and *study* the methods and teachings taught for centuries by the ancients and Rosicrucians for the mastery of self, and the development of personal power. I am not merely idly curious but sincere in my request.

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